

HOME- AND FUTURE- MAKING IN THE ETHIOPIAN DIASPORA

SOPHIA THUBAUVILLE & KIM GLÜCK, EDS.



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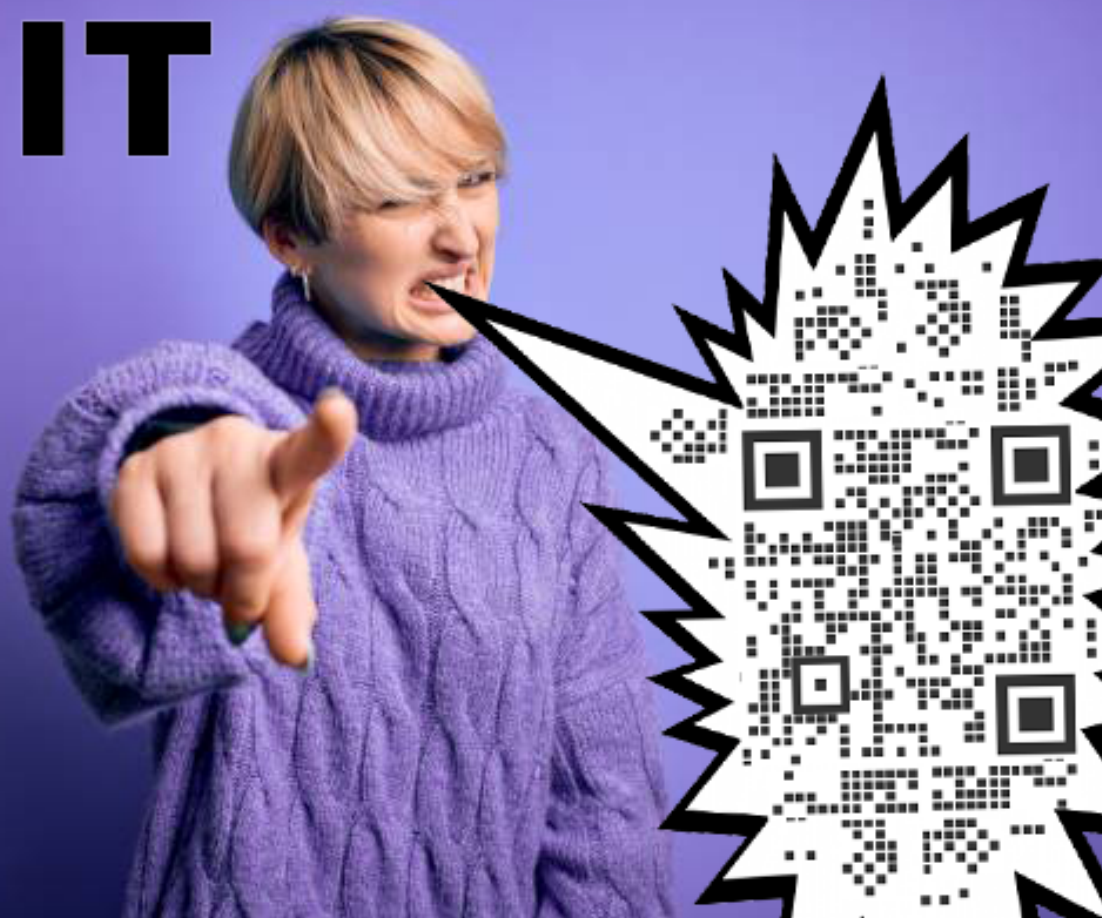
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Home- and Future- Making in the Ethiopian Diaspora

Under the direction of Sophia Thubauville and Kim Glück

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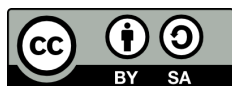
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ABSTRACT

The Ethiopian diaspora is a comparatively new phenomenon, but like the population of Ethiopia itself, it is growing at a rapid pace and spreading to more and more regions of the world. There are neverending reasons to emigrate, such as wars or conflicts and environmental or economic motives. Emigration is increasing the number of Ethiopians living in the diaspora: that is, the destinations they have dispersed to.

This collective book is based on six case studies (two from the US, three from the Middle East, and one from Germany), and reveals how Ethiopians are building a home and a future in the countries to which they emigrate. The circumstances they find in the host countries new opportunities such as freedom of expression and/or jobs, but also new hurdles such as immigration restrictions, and racism play a significant role in their home- and future- making efforts and practices. In our discussions on home- and future- making, we put a special focus on the ideas of a 'good life' that Ethiopians bring with them from their homeland or develop in their new surroundings, and on indigenous practices that help them build a new home and future in their new environment.

Home- and Future- Making in the Ethiopian Diaspora

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Edited by Sophia Thubauville & Kim Glück

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A big thank you also goes to Marius Heimer, who was the student assistant of our project. Finally, special thanks are extended to our colleagues from the Centre français des études éthiopiennes, especially Anne-Lise Goujon, who played an important role in the realization and financing of the publication.

Frankfurt am Main, October 2024
Sophia Thubauville and Kim Glück

Foreword

The floodgates of Ethiopian migration opened in the early 1970s after the death of Emperor Haile Selassie and the repressive Derg regime started indiscriminately persecuting its own people, leading to a massive outflow of population. What started as a refugee flow was later bolstered by an exodus of mostly economically motivated migrants and family reunification processes. Over the past fifty years, Ethiopians have left their homelands through a variety of routes and settled in dispersed geographies globally, mainly in the Arabian Peninsula, South Africa, North America and Europe. Ethiopian migrants dispersed globally fit within classical definitions of diaspora, whereby Ethiopian diasporic communities maintain some connection (real, fictive or imagined) with the 'homeland.' Currently, it is estimated that 2-3 million Ethiopians are living outside their homelands dispersed around the globe, leading to a second, third and later generation descendants with complicated diasporic identities. As one of the largest African sources of transnational migrants, Ethiopian migration and its resulting diaspora warrant investigation.

As the Ethiopian diaspora is maturing, heading into its fifth decade, so is the scholarship on it. The academic field of Ethiopian migration and its resulting diaspora is indebted to pioneering scholars such as Solomon Addis Getahun and Abye Tassé who paved the way for emerging scholars, myself included. I have thus far devoted my career to exploring the heterogeneous, multifaceted aspects of Ethiopian mobilities, broadly defined, from return and circular migration to transnational adoption. Most recently, I co-edited a volume on *The Global Ethiopian Diaspora: Migrations, Connections and Belongings* (University of Rochester Press, 2024) together with my colleagues Shimelis B. Gulema and Mulugetta F. Dinbabo. This volume addresses some of the lacunae we identified in the field, including philanthropic transnationalism, inter-country adoption, cultures of migration, while uncovering histories of mobility and being mindful of the wide geographies of settlement. We sought to provide a systematic historical, geographic and thematic analysis of Ethiopian migration and its resulting diaspora. We lamented the fact that while scholarship on Ethiopian migration and its diaspora is growing steadily, it lacks historical grounding, synthesis and theoretical depth. Employing a trans-disciplinary approach, we mapped out Ethiopian migration historically, geographically and thematically, rethinking the diaspora's trajectories, its streams, scope and pace, raising familiar yet important concerns about representation, ghettoization and perpetuation of inequalities. Interrogating the future of the field and

identifying new avenues for research, we end the book with an acknowledgment that there is still a significant need to expand, deepen and strengthen the growing scholarship on Ethiopian migration and its resulting diaspora. This stems from a belief that our lives, our stories, our failures and triumphs need to be documented. Our stories deserve to be written, told, researched and explained. Not to be ignored, relegated to a footnote, nor dismissed and pathologized, but rather appreciated, understood and celebrated. We deserve academic attention outside of the prevalent almost exclusive preoccupation with failures and catastrophes.

The experiences of Ethiopian migrants are multifaceted. They are not just stories of desperate despondent economic and political refugees, marginalized and undocumented subjects that embark on dangerous journeys by foot at the hands of smugglers. Although we cannot and should not neglect their stories or realities, we also need to pay attention to the cab drivers who work hard, scrape and save to make a better life for themselves and their progeny. Cab drivers are quintessential Ethiopian entrepreneurs in the US, hard workers in a system that devalues their qualifications. Ethiopian American novelist Dinaw Mengestu even featured an elusive Ethiopian immigrant cab driver as the key protagonist in his most recent and nuanced novel about immigrant displacement *Someone Like Us* (2024). Just as important are stories of the Ethiopian American who, after living in California for 30+ years, must decide about where to bury a loved one, repatriate the body to the original homeland promoting necro-patriotism or assert belonging in the adoptive country in posthumous transnationalism. These are the types of stories included in this volume. Michelle Obama in her 2018 biography *Becoming* writes about 'striving,' ordinary folks with ambition, working hard to turn their dreams into reality. The stories in this volume are stories of Ethiopian migrants dispersed across the globe striving to make a home and a future for themselves and their progeny. They include stories of *iddir* self-help organization leaders who create an important infrastructure for mutual support employing cultural mechanisms imported from the homeland; *equib* participants who subvert the formal financial system that does not know how to serve their needs and therefore set up their own self-help associations; Zere Bete Israel, at the intersections of two diasporas, using wedding celebrations as a mechanism for community building; the nostalgia and other affective dimensions of Ethiopian migrants in the UAE endeavoring to make a home away from home despite the unconducive immigration landscape. These are stories of searching for belonging, creating community, mutual support and creative home- and future making in various geographies of settlement.

This collection, published in the Contemporary Horn of Africa series of the Centre français des études éthiopiennes (CFEE), grew out of a panel on the Ethiopian diaspora at the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies

(ICES). The researchers were then part of a research project in Frankfurt, Germany (2021-2024) examining informal economic associations and future aspirations in the Ethiopian diaspora. The authors, mostly anthropologists, are all experts in their respective fields and write authoritatively employing decolonial methodologies. Methodologically sound, rooted in rich ethnography, the chapters evidence deep engagement with Ethiopian migrants as interlocutors, not just research subjects. While most scholarship in this emerging field has an unfortunate tendency to conflate the Ethiopian diaspora with North America and Europe, this volume brings diverse under-explored geographies of Ethiopian settlement in conversation, including Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Germany and the United States of America. Moreover, studies of contemporary African mobilities tend to disproportionately focus on forced migration (i.e.: refugee movements) and the migration-development nexus, to the detriment of other types and effects of migration. African migration is often studied from a purely economic or political perspective. However, this volume does not follow the general doom and gloom tone of most scholarship on the topic. Instead, the editors and authors in this volume are writing against what they see as a scholarly preoccupation with 'dark anthropology' and focus instead on Ethiopian migrants' home- and future- making and aspirations for a 'good life.'

I am elated to see such innovative scholarship on a topic so dear to my heart. I expect this book to make an impact on the scholarship of not only Ethiopian migration and more generally African mobilities. I have no doubt that readers will find this work as enlightening as I have. I invite you to engage with the text wholeheartedly. Happy Reading!

Hewan Girma, PhD

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Sophia Thubauville & Kim Glück

Home- and Future- Making in the Ethiopian Diaspora

The Ethiopian diaspora is a comparatively new phenomenon, but like the population of Ethiopia itself, it is growing at a rapid pace and spreading to more and more regions of the world (Fassil Demissie 2016). There are never-ending reasons to emigrate, such as wars or conflicts and environmental or economic motives. Emigration is increasing the number of Ethiopians living in the diaspora: that is, the destinations they have dispersed to.

This collective book is based on six case studies (two from the US, three from the Middle East, and one from Germany), and reveals how Ethiopians are building a home and a future (Appadurai 2013) in the countries to which they emigrate. The circumstances they find in the host countries – new opportunities such as freedom of expression and/or jobs, but also new hurdles such as immigration restrictions, and racism – play a significant role in their home- and future- making efforts and practices. In our discussions on home- and future- making, we put a special focus on the ideas of a ‘good life’ (Robbins 2013) that Ethiopians bring with them from their homeland or develop in their new surroundings, and on indigenous practices that help them build a new home and future in their new environment.

Keywords: diaspora, home-making, good life, future

Introduction

Ethiopia has faced significant challenges in recent years. Despite an economic boom prior to the conflict in Northern Ethiopia (2020–22), high unemployment rates, particularly among young people have persisted, fuelled by rapid population growth (Mains 2011). For many, migration offers a hopeful way to achieve a ‘good life’ and a ‘good future.’ Those who are already in the diaspora have varied perspectives on what constitutes a ‘good life,’ however, and some even aspire to return to their homeland (Chait 2011). Their aspirations align with a recent shift in anthropological focus, extending its scope beyond the present and the past to include future-oriented studies (Collins 2008; Rollason 2014). Scholars such as Appadurai (2013) and Bryant & Knight (2019)

argue that understanding how individuals and communities envision and pursue a 'good life' can shed light on broader social dynamics. This approach is particularly relevant to the study of the Ethiopian diaspora, which is facing the dual task of maintaining ties with its homeland while also forging a sense of home in the host countries. This study aims to explore how memories of Ethiopia are preserved, and how the host country is transformed into a 'new home' by the use of various means and strategies. By examining the networks and cultural practices that diaspora communities develop, this publication seeks to illustrate the anthropological implications of home-making in a transnational context.

Appadurai's concept of 'future as a cultural fact' (2004) and Strathern's insights into how people's actions are informed by as yet unrealized possible worlds (2005) are particularly relevant. They suggest that a diaspora's efforts to connect with a homeland and integrate into a host society are not merely survival strategies but are integral to aspirations for a 'good life.' This is in line with calls from scholars like Robbins (2013) and Fischer (2014) for a focus on the positive dimensions of life, challenging the preoccupation with 'dark anthropology' that emphasizes oppression and inequality. This research therefore contributes to an anthropology of the future by revealing how the Ethiopian diaspora navigates and constructs its social world within and across borders.

This edited volume compares Ethiopians' specific expectations and visions of a 'good life' in the diaspora, and investigates how they influence their visions and determine their home-making activities, and vice versa. The concept of home or homeland is a central point in any discussion of diasporas. Pointing to factors such as globalization and increased temporal and spatial dimensions, Lakha rightly asks how stable and meaningful the category of 'home' is (Lakha 2009, 90). We take these thoughts into consideration in our articles, and ask the following questions: How are ties to and memories of the Ethiopian homeland maintained in the host countries? How is the host country turned into a home? What methods and strategies are used to feel at home? What networks are created to build a home? And above all, what is home?

Home as an ideal is a state filled with nostalgia (for the past), or one full of hope and dreams that are yet to come to fruition (sometime in the future) (Hage 1997; Jansen 2017). The aspect of temporality has significant importance when it comes to understanding the process of home-making. The envisioned and hoped-for version of a better life often resides in the future, and yet it also has nostalgic undertones and a yearning for bygone times. Jansen (2008, 57) rightly stated that processes of home-making entail a constant striving towards a goal, a desired, dreamed-of, and hoped-for version of one's life, characterized by teleological tendencies. Visions of the future and aspirations for a good or

better life are inextricably linked to the concept of home, as individuals seek a sense of rootedness in and connection to their surroundings (Obeid 2013).

The term ‘home’ can refer to various temporal, geographical and spatial dimensions, and to social spaces and networks, as well as to the feelings associated with them, in line with Jansen and Löfving’s definition (“[...] home is made and remade on an everyday basis through strategies of cultural continuity, [...] as ways of overcoming alienation as well as social disintegration” (Jansen & Löfving 2011, 15)), and adopting Turton’s observation of how people *produce locality* as new places become home or endowed with meaning as a *product* of social activity, and therefore in the process of being socially active (Obeid 2013, 368 et seq.; Turton 2005, 275). The social activity or social practice of home-making is reflected in Hage’s concept of home. In his view (1997), home is conceptualised in terms of security, familiarity, community, and sense of possibility (Hage 1997, 102 et seq.; Jansen 2008, 56). Security includes not only physical security, but also an understanding of the established norms, acceptable behaviour and prevailing value system in that environment, including etiquette (Hage 1997, 102; Jansen 2017, 1). In this sense, home refers to a place characterised by the principles and values we personally consider to belong to us. The sense of familiarity refers to the extent to which an individual is familiar with a place and determines the degree of knowledge and familiarity with that place (Hage calls this “maximum spatial knowledge” referring to Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*), which can avoid feelings of alienation or strangeness (Hage 1997, 102–9; Jansen 2017, 1). A sense of community is vital for feeling at home, as it involves recognizing and being recognized by others in a space in which one feels a sense of belonging. It includes a shared understanding of symbolic expressions, morality, values, and particularly language. It is also a space where one can rely on certain individuals such as family members or friends for moral support and assistance (Hage 1997, 102–9). The sense of possibility highlights home as an ideal from which one can envision and build a future, and serves as a starting point for aspirations and dreams. Hage’s notion of home as an ideal that can only be approached allows us to emphasize the future aspect of home-making and focus on the possibilities for change, improvement, and unexpected developments (ibid.). Exploring home requires an understanding of the sense – or a relative absence – of possibility, encompassing planning, dreaming, and experiences of inclusion and detachment (for example, life-changing events such as the migration process, see Kelemework in this volume). Löfving and Jansen argue for a prospective analysis of home as a socially constructed object of longing (Jansen 2008, 56 et seq.; Jansen & Löfving 2011), a view that expands the spatial aspect of home to include the temporal, especially the future-oriented, dimension (Jansen 2008, 56 et seq.). The study of home is further enriched in the context of social events (such as weddings and funerals, see Talmi-Cohn

in this volume) or social activities such as Ethiopian savings (*equb*, see Glück, Tadesse and Nida in this volume) or insurance (*iddir*, see Thubauville in this volume) associations, as it introduces the crucial factor of temporality. We argue that participating in *equb* and *iddir* creates a present and future, and roots people in the here and now (Obeid 2013, 369) while also extrapolating from there and then. Activities in *equb* and *iddir* groups are purposeful activities that require long-term commitment and create bonds that in turn root people in particular places. However, while ethnic associations help groups reproduce or maintain their group identities away from home, and in so doing can also help their adjustment to and integration into a new country, some authors have criticized them precisely because they do not help the integration process (Chacko 2009, 243).

The Ethiopian Diaspora

We will first present the definitions of the term ‘diaspora’ we used in our research. After providing some general information on the history, development, and distribution of the Ethiopian diaspora, we will offer deeper insights into the three regions from which the contributions to this collective book originate: the US, the Middle East (especially Dubai and Israel), and Germany. The section ends with a summary of current developments and an overview of the existing literature on the Ethiopian diaspora.

At its core, the term ‘diaspora’ refers to the dispersion of a group of people from their original home or the community they were previously associated with. According to Robin Cohen, diaspora communities are characterised by the following four basic features: “members of a defined group have been dispersed to many destinations [1]; they construct a shared identity [2]; they still somewhat orient themselves to an original ‘home’ [3]; and they demonstrate an affinity with other members of the group dispersed to other places [4]” (Cohen 2022, 1). Diaspora communities maintain social, cultural, and political links with their members scattered across the world, forming transnational networks that are often characterized by their resilience and adaptability (Cohen 2022).

Butler (2001, 192) defines three essential elements of a diaspora. First, she states that there must be at least two destinations after dispersal, drawing on the etymological meaning of diaspora, which involves scattering rather than a transfer from a homeland to a single destination. Second, she highlights the existence of connections – a tie, whether real or imagined, to an existing or envisioned homeland, arguing that these bonds are the basis for the development of a diasporic identity. Third, she underscores the importance of self-perception of a group identity within diasporic communities. She notes that they consciously identify as part of an ethnonational group, and that this

consciousness binds them not only to their homeland but also to one another, fostering a sense of collective belonging (Butler 2001, 192).¹

The Ethiopian diaspora is a comparatively new phenomenon that only took shape from the mid-1970s. In the absence of a colonial past, the destinations chosen by Ethiopian migrants are shaped by a combination of factors such as geographical proximity, migrant networks, the politics of the destination country, and other historical connections (Girmachew Adugna 2021). Today, it is estimated that three million Ethiopians live abroad (Dereje Feyissa 2019). The largest Ethiopian diaspora is in the United States (246,000 members), followed by 155,300 in Israel, about 124,000 in Saudi Arabia, and 90,000 in the United Arab Emirates (Chacko & Gebre 2017; Solomon Addis Getahun 2007). However, the real number of Ethiopians in the diaspora may be at least twice as high as this. Most Ethiopian migrants take an indirect route to the West; for example, immigrants to the United States and France spent between one and three years in countries on the periphery of Ethiopia before reaching their destinations (Abye 2004).

During the imperial period (1930–74), emigration from Ethiopia was practically non-existent (Solomon Addis Getahun 2007, 3). Only a few members of the imperial nobility selected by the emperor himself studied abroad in America and Europe, the intention being to bring the education and knowledge gained there into the Ethiopian state apparatus. The situation changed in the mid-1970s with the takeover of the Derg military junta (1974–87) and the resulting upheaval in the balance of power. The Derg persecuted and killed its political opponents, especially members of the nobility and the former imperial political sounding board and educated elite, young high school and university students. It was during this violent campaign of political repression that mass migration out of Ethiopia began. Within just six years of the socialist revolution, 1,743,800 Ethiopians had fled their homes (Solomon Addis Getahun 2007, 48). At the same time, the north of the country, especially the regions of Wollo, Tigray, and Northern Shoa, was hit by drought, resulting in famine and starvation. Thousands fled to neighbouring countries such as Sudan. These political and economic reasons, and in the case of the Ethiopian Jewish community (which is also known under the self-designation of ‘Beta

¹ There are numerous works on defining diaspora. To include them all would go beyond the scope of this paper. Both Cohen and Butler refer to William Safran (1991) in their influential works on the concept of diaspora.

Israel,² which translates as ‘house of Israel’) religious motives, led to increased emigration and flight by Ethiopians between the 1970s and 1990s (Fassil Demissie 2016, 126–28). In recent years, the main reasons for emigration have been a lack of jobs, high youth unemployment, family reunification, and religious motives in the case of Ethiopian Jews (Mains 2011). In the following, we give a more detailed overview on the diaspora communities that are dealt with in the contributions to this volume. These are the United States, Middle East (Israel and Dubai), and Germany.

The United States

The Ethiopian diaspora in the United States (US) was initially made up of the first Ethiopian intellectuals who won scholarships in the US, when the period of the so-called ‘Red Terror’ began. At that time, an estimated 5,000 Ethiopian students, diplomats, tourists, and businesspersons did not return to their homeland (Chacko & Gebre 2017, 220). With the Refugee Act of the 1980s, the US decided to host a large number of Ethiopians, and granted them asylum. Between 1980 and 1999, an average of 1,500 refugees from Ethiopia were admitted to the US every year. Those who arrived during the Red Terror mainly came from Gondar, Tigray, and Wollo and urban centres like Addis Ababa, which had been hit the hardest by the Red Terror and the 1984 famine (Solomon Addis Getahun 2007, 135). The political turmoil in Ethiopia did not come to an end even with the fall of the Derg in 1991, however, and another major flow of refugees entered the US from 1998 to 2000 because of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. As immigrants changed their status to US citizens, a process of chain migration followed, and is still continuing today (Chacko & Cheung 2011). Another factor for recent migration, which is not linked to Ethiopian politics, is the introduction of the Diversity Visa Program, which is known in Ethiopia as the lottery. This programme provided work permits for professionals and further stimulated the flow of immigrants from Ethiopia between 2003 and 2013. 36,000 Ethiopians arrived in the US and became legal residents during the life of the programme (Chacko & Gebre 2017, 221). The total number of Ethiopians in the US today is hard to calculate. The statistics offer one number, but it is believed to be too small, as it only

² In the case of Ethiopian Jews, the use of designations is somewhat complex. It depends on which immigrant generation (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) one belongs to: that is, whether one was born in Ethiopia (the 1st generation, who would most likely use the term Beta Israel) or in Israel as a descendant of Ethiopian Jewish parents (the 2nd and 3rd generation, would most likely refer to themselves as Ethiopian Israelis or Israelis). There is also the Falash Mura group, who converted from Judaism to Christianity in Ethiopia, and are the current Jewish migrants from Ethiopia to Israel. For further discussion of the designation process, see Glück in this volume; Kaplan (2013); Hamilton & Benti (2007).

includes “foreign-born” citizens. According to the Migration Policy Institute, for example, about 251,000 Ethiopian-born immigrants and their children were living in the US in 2014, but the real number is believed to be about half a million, which is twice as high. This makes Ethiopians the second-largest African diaspora in the US after Nigerians. 60% of the Ethiopian immigrants arrived after 2000 (Migration Policy Institute 2014), and so they belong to one of the diasporas that arrived late and settled in the US most recently. The Ethiopian diaspora in North America is extremely diverse in terms of religion (Nida 2007), ethnic and regional origin, and educational and economic background (Chacko & Cheung 2011; Solomon Addis Getahun 2007). It is comparatively well educated, with 29.5% of its members having at least an undergraduate degree (Terrazas 2007). Its members are highly politicized, and devote enormous resources to their country of origin (Chacko 2011, 173; Kaplan 2010, 83; Lyons 2007, 531). Because of the large size of the Ethiopian diaspora population in the US, various political movements have formed (Asafa Jalata 2002), and even have the capacity to influence Ethiopian politics from afar (Lyons 2006).

People of Ethiopian origin are mainly concentrated in large cities. With its good infrastructure and job opportunities, Washington D.C. not only hosts the largest community of people of Ethiopian origin, but also serves as an important point of entry to the US. The Greater Los Angeles area is home to about 70,000 to 80,000 Ethiopians (Ober 2022): Central Los Angeles even has the first ethnically- designated enclave of Ethiopians in the US, known as “Little Ethiopia” consisting of two blocks where Ethiopian restaurants and businesses are lined up next to each other. This area was already informally known as “Little Addis” in the 1990s, and was officially named “Little Ethiopia” in 2002 (Chacko & Cheung 2011, 129). A similar plan to have an Ethiopian enclave around the U Street area of Washington D.C. failed because it is not just an area where Ethiopian restaurants have accumulated in the recent past: historically, many Afro-American bars and clubs were located there (Chacko & Cheung 2011, 140).

The Middle East

The Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, has been a favourite destination for Ethiopian migrants looking for economic opportunities since the 1990s (Girmachew Adugna 2021). The Middle East is on the so-called Eastern Migration Route, and it is not only a destination, but also a stopover for migrants on their way to places beyond the region. With 164,000 members, Saudi Arabia is home to the second-largest Ethiopian diaspora in the world (Girmachew Adugna 2021), although other countries in the region also have a good number of Ethiopian migrants – in 2007, there were 8,781 in Jordan, 3,363 in the United Arab Emirates, 1,483 in Kuwait, and 1,233 in Yemen

(Terrazas 2007). In general, migrants who travel from Ethiopia to destinations in the Middle East are characterized by their irregular status. Many of them are young single women who are looking for jobs as domestic workers. They make up 95% of the total number (Girmachew Adugna 2021). Unfortunately, the trafficking of young, often uneducated women from poor, rural families on this migration route is an increasing problem (Terrazas 2007). The male migrants who migrate to the Middle East are often seeking jobs in the construction or agricultural sectors (Girmachew Adugna 2021).

Israel is a special case in terms of Ethiopian migration to the Middle East. The Ethiopian Jewish community has been the subject of numerous studies since its members were religiously recognised as Jews in 1975³ (Ashkenazi & Weingrod 1985; Hertzog 1999; Kaplan 1985; Salamon 1999). This recognition of their Jewishness marked a turning point for immigration to Israel. As legal Jews, they now had the right to become Israeli citizens under the Law of Return, “[...] which sets the conditions for automatic citizenship for Jewish applicants” (Salamon 2003, 6; Levy & Weingrod 2006, 698). The period from 1975 to the beginning of 1990 was marked by mass migration to Israel. This was due to external migration factors such as the repressive policies of the Derg regime (for example, Ethiopian Jews were not allowed to own land, and the regime selected Jews for forced conscription), and to northern Ethiopia, the home region of the Ethiopian Jewish community, being hit by a drought and affected by famine. In addition to these external migration factors, there was above all a religious motivation to go to Israel, mainly favoured by official recognition as Jews (Kaplan & Rosen 1994, 62–66).

To stop the gradual immigration, the Israeli government launched two major operations known as Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991. During these operations, more than 20,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted from Ethiopia to Israel. By the end of 1993, the majority of Ethiopian Jews had their centre of life in Israel (Kaplan & Rosen 1994, 59). With the two waves of immigration, over 90% of Ethiopian Jews (almost 45,000 people) immigrated to Israel.⁴ It was compulsory for the Ethiopian Jewish community

³ The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel at the time, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, recognised them as descendants of the lost tribe of Dan. In 1975, the Israeli government accepted Rabbi Ovadia’s ruling and recognised the Ethiopian Jews known as Beta Israel (House of Israel) as Jews (Anteby-Yemini 2004, 146).

⁴ In recent years, there have been increasing voices in the Ethiopian Jewish community who tell their own immigration stories and emphasise that there had already been emigrations of Jews from Ethiopia to Israel before the two state-organised immigration campaigns. Before 1974, for example, we know that a relatively small group of Ethiopian Jews, mainly men who studied and entered on a tourist visa and then stayed in the country illegally, immigrated to Israel. As activists, they fought for their Judaism and pushed the religious recognition process forward (Yerday 2019).

to live in an absorption centre for up to two years after their arrival in Israel, a policy that is still followed today (Association of Ethiopian Jews 2018; Keidar 2014). Israeli absorption centres are state institutions that focus on integrating immigrants (*olim*) who have made *aliyah* (Jewish immigration to Israel) and introducing them to the country's language, customs, and norms. The use of absorption centres is usually voluntary, but this is not the case with Ethiopian Jews.⁵ These centres create a pattern of dependency (Hertzog 1999, 194), as newcomers are completely dependent on the centre's staff, who provide them with information, allocate money to them, etc. (Hertzog 1999; Kaplan 2010, 79; Keidar 2014).

Unification with other Jews in Israel was, and still is, challenging. The Ethiopian Jews, who had lived in rural areas and were uneducated, had to adapt to urban life in Israel's cities and acquire the professional qualifications needed to make a living. As Jewish citizens, however, they were directly integrated into the Israeli social system. When describing the migration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, it is important to remember that the definition of diaspora in the context of the Beta Israel community means that Israel, the Promised Land, is the long-awaited home for Jewish diaspora communities. It is only when one returns to Israel that one has arrived home. According to this view, life in Ethiopia is actually life in a diaspora (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 22–26; Glück, this volume).⁶

In addition to the 155,300 Ethiopian Israelis, there is a small minority of about 8,700 Ethiopian asylum seekers in Israel, most of whom are Christians (CBS 2020; Peleg 2021). In Israel, religious affiliation also determines the question of citizenship. In contrast to the Beta Israel community from Ethiopia, Ethiopian asylum seekers only receive a temporary residence permit in Israel. The main reasons for leaving Ethiopia are predominantly socio-economic. Disappointed by the Ethiopian labour market and the lack of prospects and planning opportunities, many people hope for a steady income, a secure job, and a better life abroad. Israel is not the original destination for many Ethiopian migrants, but it often becomes desirable after a failed attempt to immigrate to Europe. As of mid-2021, Israel had approximately 50,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Eritrea and Sudan (UNHCR 2021, 1), but it has recognized only a small number of them – around 573 individuals

⁵ It is known that *olims* from other countries who came to Israel at the same time as the Ethiopian Jews (for instance, from Russia after the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s) were treated differently. They were not obliged to live in an absorption centre for the first 18–24 months; they received monthly allowances directly from the Israeli state and were allowed to choose their own places of residence (Association of Ethiopian Jews 2018; Hertzog 1999, xxvi).

⁶ For a further discussion on these issues – “returning home to Jerusalem” vs. “Ethiopia as a diaspora,” see Lyons (2016).

in 2021, who underwent a rigorous assessment process to confirm their refugee status. Refugees in Israel cannot obtain permanent status, and even those who are recognized as refugees only have temporary status for many years (UNHCR 2021, 2 et seq.; Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012).

Germany

The Ethiopian diaspora in Germany is very different again from the communities in the US and the Middle East we have described above. Even though the 21,865 Ethiopians in Germany in 2022⁷ seems to be low in comparison, it has still the fourth-largest Ethiopian diaspora among western countries, after the US, Canada, and Sweden (Chacko and Gebre 2013). In addition to the 21,865 Ethiopian passport-holders, of course, there is also a growing number of naturalized people of Ethiopian descent and people of Ethiopian origin who were born in Germany. As in many Western countries, the Ethiopian diaspora began with university students who studied in Germany when Haile Selassie was overthrown and the Derg military junta took power in 1974. In 2009, it was estimated that the members of the diaspora who arrived in Germany before 1974 and their families only made up 5 percent of the Ethiopian diaspora in Germany. A further 20-30 per arrived in Germany for political reasons after the Derg took power. Between 65 and 70 per cent left Ethiopia for Germany after 1991 for political and/or economic reasons (Schlenzka 2009, 10). Because the Ethiopian diaspora roughly doubled between 2009 and 2022, these percentages must be reduced by half and so only 2.5 percent of today's Ethiopians in Germany arrived for educational purposes before 1974, 10-15 per cent arrived before 1991, and 32.5-35 per cent arrived after. 50 percent are very recent immigrants who arrived after 2009 because of the political and economic turmoil in their home country. In 2009, around 15 percent of Ethiopians in Germany were working as professionals (teachers, engineers, medical doctors, etc.), while the remaining members of the community worked in service professions and the service sector (Schlenzka 2009, 15). This has undoubtedly changed since then, as the population of the diaspora has doubled, but information on the newer numbers is unfortunately missing. Ethnically speaking, the diaspora in Germany is very diverse. Most members belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox church (80-90 per cent), and there are many Protestants in the Oromo community. There are only a few Muslims and Catholics (Schlenzka 2009, 13). Most of the members of the community live in large metropolitan areas such as Frankfurt am Main, Cologne, Berlin, and Munich in the west of the country. Only a few live in the former East Germany (Warnecke 2015, 18).

Despite the fact that it is widely dispersed, the Ethiopian diaspora has maintained strong ties to the homeland and works towards development and

⁷ According to Statista (de.statista.com).

progress in Ethiopia (Chacko and Gebre 2024; Fassil Demissie 2016, 126; Schlenzka 2009). The ethnic and religious diversity of Ethiopian society is reflected in its diaspora community, and identity and identification with the motherland is a very complex issue when it comes to the diaspora. Although identification is, as in most cases, a matter of relativity, Ethiopians in the diaspora are mainly divided between migrants who identify with Pan-Ethiopian nationalism and those who identify with an ethno-national identity. Ethiopian nationalists often appeal to an essentialist, trans-historical, territorial identity, which they present as open and inclusive, while others reject this national identity because they believe it to be a means of legitimizing the hegemony of certain ethnic elites. The large numbers of Oromo nationalists have e.g. given ethnic identity precedence over national affiliation (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001, 18).

Numerous scholarly articles on the Ethiopian diaspora based on ethnographic research have been published in recent years. The contributions in the edited volume “Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora” by Steven Kaplan and Kay Kaufman Shelemay use Butler’s analytical framework⁸ to study it, allowing for a comparison between contemporary developments within the Ethiopian diaspora while also considering the past (Shelemay & Kaplan 2015). The special issue “Ethiopians in an Age of Migration. Scattered lives beyond borders” edited by Fassil Demissie highlights the spatial dimension of the diasporic experiences of Ethiopian migrants, with contributions that focus on the ongoing socio-political, historical, and demographic interrelations between Ethiopia and the destination countries for migration, spanning the arc between ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Fassil Demissie 2016). A very recent publication “The Global Ethiopian Diaspora” by Shimelis B. Gulema, Hewan Girma and Mulugeta F. Dinbabo (2024) wants to correct the image that the Ethiopian diaspora is mainly spread across the US and Europe by including case studies from Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

This book adds to the publications mentioned above by addressing the intricate relationship between time and space, exploring how temporal and spatial factors shape the Ethiopian diaspora experience. In the case studies discussed below, the concepts of time and space go beyond the present and the past to include the future and the longing for a hoped-for and dreamed-about home.

⁸ Butler’s approach to diasporic research refers to five dimensions: (1) Reasons for, and conditions of, the dispersal; (2) Relationship with the homeland; (3) Relationship with host lands; (4) Interrelationships within communities of the diaspora; (5) Comparative (Butler 2001, 195).

Contributions

The articles in this edited volume vividly illustrate the different interpretations and practices of home-making and the ways the pursuit of a ‘good life’ is shaped by the lived realities in diaspora communities (for example, legal status). They look at what people in the different Ethiopian diaspora communities do in the here and now to shape their future. However, it is the visions of the future and the dreams of a better or different life that shape and influence their activities in the present. By hoping for something, by imagining something, one becomes active in the present, and here, we adapt Bryant’s assumption that the future awakens the present (Bryant 2020, 16).

This book and some of the underlying research (Glück, Nida, and Thubauville) was funded by the DFG project “On the Saf(v)e Side: Informal Economic Associations and Future Aspirations in the Ethiopian Diaspora” (2021–24). Most of the articles (Glück, Kelemework, Nida, Talmi-Cohn, and Thubauville) came from the panel entitled “Saving and Being Safe Away from ‘Home’: The Case of Diasporic Ethiopians” organized during the 21st International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa in September 2022. All the contributions are based on an analysis of ethnographic data that was collected using a range of ethnological methods, including fieldwork visits, participant observation, interviews, and more. In addition, each article addresses the authors’ positioning in their research.

The articles begin with two different perspectives on Ethiopians in the US, with a focus on Southern California. Worku Nida’s article concentrates on the future rather than home-making. He describes how diasporic Ethiopians in Los Angeles and Seattle create, use, and interpret Ethiopian rotating saving and credit associations to build a ‘good life’ and a ‘good future’ for themselves in their new homeland. His examples reveal how the use of credit and savings associations gives diasporic Ethiopians an increased sense of agency and of being in charge of their destinies and futures. Sophia Thubauville’s article on Ethiopians in Southern California touches on yet another sphere of the future – the afterlife of diasporic Ethiopians. In the US, the large, expensive burials that are common in Ethiopia are financed and organized with the help of insurance associations, according to the Ethiopian model. These associations do not influence the decision of a deceased’s last resting place, however, which leads to an increasing number of diasporic Ethiopians being buried in the US, thereby making and marking their presence and their future in their new home country.

The following three articles illustrate the lives of Ethiopians in the Middle East, with examples from Israel and Dubai. Ravit Talmi-Cohn’s contribution delves into the processes of home-making among Ethiopian Israelis, offering insights into the macro, micro, and, as she terms it, *meso* levels and their dynamic interplay. Her study examines the significance of social events,

particularly funerals and weddings, in shaping the notion of home. She investigates how individuals navigate and negotiate their understanding of home across national borders, providing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted aspects of home-making in the Ethiopian Israeli context. Kim Glück's article explores the practice of Ethiopian rotating saving and credit associations among Israelis from an Ethiopian-Jewish immigrant background and within the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community in Israel. While each group has its own vision of the future and more importantly, its own definition of home, both share the practice of Ethiopian rotating saving and credit associations. Glück analyses the future-oriented notion of *equb* in the context of home-making processes and shows the extent to which the different socio-political and legal positions and desires and longings for a better life influence the notion of home, both among Ethiopian Israelis and within the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community. Kelemework Tafere Reda's contribution also deals with the concept of home, but it illustrates it in the context of the Ethiopian diaspora community in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Because of the UAE's immigration policy and absence of asylum programmes, Ethiopians see it as a place to make a livelihood rather than as a home. He therefore describes the migration from Ethiopia to the UAE as an "incomplete migration" whose endpoint of international mobility is unknown.

The last contribution, by Michael Emru Tadesse, also makes the Ethiopian savings associations, *equb*, the focus of his study. He examines them in the Ethiopian diaspora in Berlin and Munich, Germany, and concludes that *equb* offer opportunities to Ethiopians in their new home, where they are structurally and institutionally discriminated against, to overcome the barriers and inequalities created by discrimination. He describes Ethiopian *equbs* in Germany as good examples of the Black Social Solidarity Economy (BSSE), a term coined by Hossein (2018). According to him, Ethiopians in Germany come together to establish a non-capitalist and non-exploitative financial system that helps to fight against social and business exclusion and to contribute to the creation and expansion of fair, democratic, and sustainable economies, and therefore to building new possible futures in the wake of discrimination.

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Equbs as Technologies of the ‘Good Life’ and the Future among Diasporic Ethiopians in the United States

A growing number of recent anthropological studies have analysed how people use various strategies to build a ‘good life’ and a ‘good future.’ Based on an ethnographic case study of *equbs* (Ethiopian rotating saving and credit associations, ROSCAs), this article examines how diasporic Ethiopians in Los Angeles (LA) and Seattle, in the United States, advance their wellbeing by creating, using, and interpreting *equbs*. The article argues that *equbs* are ‘technologies’ of the ‘good life’ and future through which people are engaged in *equb*-funded home- and future- making practices that create entrepreneurship, homes, wealth, and communities such as Little Ethiopia, a home away from home. The article broadly contributes to our anthropological understanding of ROSCAs, ‘the good life’ and future, and diasporic experiences.

Keywords: *equbs*, technologies, good life, home- and future- making, diasporic Ethiopians

Introduction

Rotating saving and credit associations (ROSCAs) are ubiquitous in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and their diasporas in Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Social scientists have long been interested in understanding these institutions and have generated abundant literature on various aspects of ROSCAs in various sociocultural settings (Ardener 1964; Ardener and Burman 1995; Geertz 1962). These conventional studies have primarily focused on ROSCAs’ two central functions – savings and credit, serving people who work and live on the margins of global capitalism and politics – although writers have emphasized various aspects of these institutions.¹

¹ Some writers have highlighted ROSCAs’ role in reducing transactional costs, others thought that they would disappear with the expansion of modernity, and still others see the institutions as embedded in a web of social relations (see Geertz 1962; Light, Kwun, and Zhong 1990).

Building on these studies, I explore ways in which diasporic Ethiopians in the US create, use, and interpret *equbs*. I expand these conversations by theorizing *equbs* as technologies of the ‘good life’ and future, highlighting people’s *equb*-dependent home- and future- making practices. This paper is based on ethnographic research, including observations of the dynamics of *equb* meetings in Los Angeles (LA) and conducting in-depth interviews in LA and Seattle. As a native Ethiopian who grew up observing how *equbs* work in Addis Ababa, subsequently earning a Ph.D. in anthropology and pursuing an academic career in the US, and currently living in Los Angeles, I am both a cultural insider and an academic outsider. As a trained anthropologist, I am able to defamiliarize the familiar – that is, *equb* activities among diasporic Ethiopian communities – while also examining them “from a position of intimate affinity” (Narayan 1993, 671). This affinity allowed me to gain easy access to the *equb* activities I observed and to the participants I interviewed for my research. I conducted a total of 12 person-centred interviews (with 12 *equb* members consisting of two *equb* leaders and ten *equb* participants, of whom three were female and nine male *equb* members) both in-person and via zoom during 2021 and 2022 (supplemented by digital research). I generated data on aspects of two *equbs* in LA and Seattle, which I use as examples out of a number of *equbs* that exist not just in LA and Seattle, but also in other cities across the US that have a concentration of diasporic Ethiopians.² In the following sections, I present brief histories and workings of the *equb*, its transformative role in working as technologies of the ‘good life’ and future, its home- and future- making work, its various uses, and a conclusion.

Brief Histories of *Equbs* in Ethiopia, LA, and Seattle

Various scholarly studies have demonstrated that *equbs* are ubiquitous in Ethiopia, and have provided motivational, historical, economic, and ethnohistorical accounts of the institution (Dejene Aredo 1993; Engdawork Desta 1995; Nida 2022; Tirfe Mammo 1999). *Equbs* are the Gurage-turned-Ethiopian version of rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) and have played crucial roles in Gurage entrepreneurial success. One of the eighty-six ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the Gurage are uniquely associated with large-scale migration and entrepreneurial success in the Ethiopian imaginaries, as evidenced by multiple national sayings in Amharic such as: “*Guragena Landrover yemayed-ersubit yelem*,” (“There is no place where the Gurage and the Land Rover do not reach”). This migratory culture is one of the factors that gave birth to the Gurage’s entrepreneurial bent.

² This study of *equbs* in LA and Seattle is part of a multisited research on informal banks and insurance among diasporic Ethiopian communities funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

I have examined elsewhere how the Gurage have emerged as Ethiopia's quintessential entrepreneurial class over the last seven decades (Nida 2022, 2006). I demonstrated in these studies that *equbs* are one of the three key intersecting elements of what I call the three-legged scaffolding of entrepreneurial success, which includes individual initiatives, ethnocultural resources (mainly *equbs*), and political opportunity structures, which can also be dubbed technologies of entrepreneurial success. The Gurage used *equbs* as shorthand for solidarity. They generated otherwise scarce capital, and provided an organizational structure and ideology for building and expanding business enterprises. Gurage migratory experiences transformed *equbs*, which had been a village institution, into a capitalist enterprise, and they helped the Gurage achieve demographic and leadership superiority within the national entrepreneurial landscape.

Nowhere are these perspectives and realities of *equbs* better captured than in the national Amharic saying "*Sewen sew yaderegew equb new*," ("*Equb* makes man [people]"). This particular proverb emerged as Gurage entrepreneurs' counter-slogan to the hegemonic discourses of the socialist *Derg* (a military-junta) state in the 1970s, which were hostile to capitalist economic sectors. One of the socialist slogans was Engel's famous quote "*Sewen sew yaderegew sira new*," ("*Labour* makes man [people]"), to which Gurage entrepreneurs responded with their own slogan "*Sewen sew yaderegew equb new*" ("*Equb* makes people") which became national. These messages reveal what Fischer (2014) calls "subjective" understandings of what individual Gurage valued, what humanity meant, and how to construct their humanity and 'good lives.' Labour was a defining ingredient of humanity for Engels, just as *equb* was and is for the Gurage. The data reveal that, historically, *equbs* were an innovation created by Gurage village women to mobilize resources such as milk, butter, and money for annual festivities and weddings in village contexts (Nida 2006).³ Other authors, however, have reported that *equbs* were invented in urban settings in Addis Ababa (Pankhurst and Eshete 1958). Subsequently, these institutions proved their elasticity in urban settings, where Gurage migrants used them in new ways in urban and migratory contexts. In the context of Ethiopia, therefore, I argue that *equbs* are Gurage innovations⁴ that were later adapted by non-Gurage Ethiopians living in Ethiopia and its diasporas.

³ Parallel stories of the evolution of ROSCAs from women's activities are reported elsewhere (see Ardener and Burman 1995). In their edited volume, Ardener and Burman provide comprehensive accounts of women's ROSCAs in a variety of sociocultural contexts the world over. ⁴ See Nida (2022). Similarly, contributions in kind were commonly used in various ROSCAs, see Bascom (1952) for how Yoruba people in Nigeria contributed in cowries to *esusu*, their ROSCAs, in pre-colonial times.

Equbs in LA and Seattle

There are many *equbs* of various sizes organized by diasporic Ethiopians in cities throughout the US, including LA and Seattle. My study focuses on two examples, one in LA and one in Seattle. The histories of *equbs* in LA and Seattle are related to the history of Ethiopian immigration into the two cities. Like many other diasporic groups, Ethiopian immigrants in LA and Seattle live and work transnationally in a global and globalizing world characterized by the flows of peoples, ideas, cultures, capital, and labour. Ethiopians participated in these intensified flows of things and people, bringing elements of their cultures, including *equb*, through waves of immigration to LA, Seattle, and other cities in the US beginning in the 1950s. Ethiopian immigrants in LA and Seattle come from various ethnic groups in Ethiopia, including the Amhara, Oromo, Wolayta, and Gurage, where *equb* originated (Nida 2006). Interestingly, the histories of *equb* in LA and Seattle are intertwined with Gurage Ethiopian immigrants' rich lived experiences in the two cities. In diasporic contexts, mainstream media and official and academic narratives lump all these various ethnic groups into a single marker of (immigrant and/or ethnic) identity: that is, Ethiopian immigrants and/or Ethiopian Americans, who are also referred to as African/Black immigrants and/or Black/African Americans.⁵ For example, Shikur, one of my interlocutors, immigrated to LA in the 1980s, where he has lived for more than four decades. He is a Gurage Ethiopian American, and one of the three founders of the oldest *equb* association in LA, which was established in 1984. However, Ethiopianness is the key shared identity when it comes to organizing and operating *equbs* among diasporic Ethiopians, as markers of various ethnic identities are less emphasized. When Shikur arrived in LA, there was one Ethiopian restaurant called Ghion, which was in Culver City. Shikur knew the owners of the restaurant, whose business was not thriving, and he wanted to help them improve their business by creating an *equb* there.

The development of *equbs* in Seattle followed a similar pattern. Werdiwet, one of my interviewees from Seattle, told me that she created her *equb* to improve her own and her *equb* members' life chances. She went from Ethiopia to Kentucky in the 1990s to go to school, and subsequently moved to Washington, D.C., and then to Seattle in 2008. After trying to survive on low-wage jobs and working multiple shifts, she wanted to work for herself. "[...] I was living from paycheck to paycheck. I was struggling with life, [and] work. One night I just came up with this idea that I have to create an *equb* and start my own business, instead of working for others with little payment," said Werdiwet. In response to my question as to where she got the idea of

⁵ For example, see Chacko (2003); Kassahun Kebede (2017).

an *equb* (as a means to improve her life) from, she replied in Amharic: “*equb yemetanibet new, bahilachen new*” (“the *equb* is part of our history, our culture”). Growing up in Ethiopia, I saw my father participating in *equbs* with friends for so many years, and sometimes he would take me with him to the *equb* meetings on Sundays. That is what came to my mind. I know that the *equb* is useful.” This is how Werdiwet created her first *equb* ten years ago, and she has been its leader ever since. Following Appadurai’s (2004) insightful essay entitled “The capacity to aspire,” I characterize *equbs* as diasporic Ethiopians’ socio-cultural capacities to aspire and lift themselves out of poverty.

Resonating with Werdiwet’s subjective understanding of the (cultural) capacity to aspire, and imagining what a ‘good life’ could look like and how to realize it, Shikur told me that *equb* is “a historical process in our country, in Ethiopia, where people come together, improve their lives, build, and lead their future lives by contributing a specific amount of money. That is what we brought here.” I argue that the transformative work of *equbs* as technologies of the ‘good life’ and future in diasporas – (*equb*-induced individual and collective) self-improvements of diasporic Ethiopians – are a reconstituted version of how Ethiopians use *equbs* to construct their ‘good lives’ and futures in Ethiopia. Thus, the “*equbs* as technologies of the good life” approach allows us to theorize *equbs*/ROSCAs across spaces, times, and cultures.

By examining *equbs* as technologies of the ‘good life’ and future, this article contributes new perspectives to the “anthropologies of ‘the good’” (Ortner 2016, 34), which are consistent with recent studies by leading anthropologists who have theorized topics such as ‘the good’ (Robbins 2013), ‘the good life and wellbeing’ (Fischer 2014; Calestani 2008), and a culturally embedded ‘good future’ (Appadurai 2004, 2013). In her assessment of theoretical developments in anthropology since the 1980s (2016), Ortner categorized anthropological works into two types – ‘dark anthropology’ and ‘anthropologies of the good’ – arguing that both types of anthropology emerged as responses to the worsening life situations of people across the world as a result of the “destructive” policies of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s. For Ortner, ‘dark anthropologies’ focused largely on what Joel Robbins calls “the suffering subject” (2013, 447), and therefore examined structures of power and wealth, paying attention to patterns of identity-based exploitation and (global) inequalities (by race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and nation). For both Ortner and Robbins, these dark anthropological developments signified a shift in anthropology’s framing of the ‘other’ from communities and cultures that are radically different from that of the anthropologists to a focus on the suffering subjects. Ortner’s second type, ‘anthropologies of the good,’ refers to a wide range of anthropological studies that have examined the various strategies and processes through which people craft their ‘good lives’ and futures, which afforded people a sense of agency. Robbins concurs with

Ortner (2013, 447), writing that such works represented a new shift from ‘dark anthropology’ to “an anthropology of the good capable of recovering some of the critical force of an earlier anthropology without taking on its weaknesses.”

Fischer’s (2014) seminal book is one of the works that marked this shift. Based on his comparative ethnographic research among middle-class supermarket shoppers in Germany and poor farmers and coffee growers in Guatemala, Fischer identified local visions of, and values associated with, the ‘good life’ and wellbeing that were shared by both his Guatemalan and German interlocutors, despite the two groups’ radically different sociocultural contexts. Building on the local meanings of wellbeing and the ‘good life’ in Guatemala and Germany, Fischer developed theories of wellbeing and the ‘good life’ in which he conceived the ‘good life’ as both an end and a process that involves what he dubbed “qualitative elements of wellbeing,” including aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, and commitment to larger purposes. In so doing, Fischer underscored how people who studied wellbeing focused on statistics without paying attention to local people’s own conceptions of wellbeing and the ‘good life.’

In this article, I build on these local definitions of *equbs* and visions of the ‘good life’ and future to develop a narrative through which I intend to develop new perspectives on *equbs* and ROSCAs broadly. Following Fischer’s apt observation of “markets as technologies,” I argue that *equbs* are technologies of the ‘good life’ (the ‘good life’ being understood as variously envisioned and contested), and propose a new analytical approach to *equbs* that centres local people’s ideas of what constitutes the ‘good life’ as an end and how they fulfil their aspirations. As Fischer wrote, “The market constitutes a key venue through which people pursue the projects of their lives and their visions of the good life” (2014, 211). This resonates strongly with how *equbs* work among Ethiopians both in the diaspora and in Ethiopia.

***Equbs* as Technologies of the ‘Good Life’ and Future**

“The *Equb* is a ladder for development” (interview,⁶ 22 February 2022), as one *equb* participant put it. “As *equb* leaders, we are lifting people [*equb* members and their families] out of poverty” (interview, 1 November 2022), an *equb* leader said. These two personal testimonies represent the local interpretations of *equbs* among diasporic Ethiopians in the US as tools to achieve development and lift people out of poverty. These testimonials are a story (of stories) about how diasporic Ethiopians use *equbs* to envision and create their ‘good lives’ and futures. Fischer underscored the fact that valuing local people’s aspirations and agency is critically important: “Aspiration, a hope for the future informed by

⁶ In this article, most informants have been anonymized and/or given false names to protect their identities.

ideas about the good life,” Fischer wrote, “gives direction to agency – the power to act and the sense of having control over one’s own destiny” (2014, 207).

As noted above, Werdiwet revealed how she envisioned the *equb* as a pathway to the ‘good life,’ a tool to improve her lot. Similarly, the interview materials I show below provide insights into how people pursue the ‘good life,’ and how they assert their (individual and collective) agency by tapping into and mobilizing resources rooted in their homeland cultures and upbringings that they brought with them to the US. For example, Shikur tells this story of how he and two friends organized the first *equb* association in LA:

When I came to this country, there was one Habasha restaurant in Culver City... I was close to the owners. I observed that their business was not doing well. I thought that if we start [an] *equb* in the restaurant, like people back in Ethiopia do, we could attract more customers, people who would eat and drink there, which would help them improve their restaurant business, since *equb* is a way of supporting existing businesses and creating money to start new businesses. After I discussed this with a couple of close friends, I proposed this idea to the owners, since we were friends and close to one another. The owners agreed. Then we mobilized friends and family members to join our new *equb*, where I and my friends became leaders. We were elected by the members as *yequb dagna*, *yequb tsehai*, *yequb genzeb yazhe* (“the judge, secretary, and treasurer”) of the *equb*. We agreed to meet at the restaurant weekly on Tuesdays, where the newly recruited members contributed an agreed upon amount of money, 500 dollars for a full prize. If someone wanted to join *equb* but could not afford to pay the full contribution of 500 dollars a week, we allowed them to partner with another individual who could split the amount, where the partners paid 250 dollars each under “*ande eta*,” one prize. The two partners split the lump sum when they received it either through special requests or priority or prize/*eta*. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

This was how the first *equb* was formed in 1984, a story corroborated by other respondents’ accounts of the histories of *equbs* in LA. These accounts reveal that subsequently other *equbs* were organized by Ethiopian immigrants in LA. They further highlight the intersectionalities of the various key elements of the ‘good life,’ including aspirations, opportunities (created by their migratory experiences), and agency.

Fischer (2014, 211–12) wrote:

The market constitutes a key venue through which people pursue the projects of their lives and their visions of the good life. Public discourse on both sides of the Atlantic tends to portray markets in binary moral terms. Yet our German consumers and Guatemalan farmers do not see markets as inherently good or bad, but as mechanisms-tools, apparatuses-to achieve various ends. [...] Following their view, we may understand markets as mechanisms: technologies that can and do fail, imperfect (often inefficient) means of achieving other ends.

These views of the market resonate with the agentive work of *equbs* and the ways Shikur and his team assessed the dwindling market situation of his friend's restaurant business and his desire to help redress the problem by starting weekly *equb* meetings at the restaurant.

Similarly, Petersen et al. (2022, 431) reformulated original Foucauldian notions of “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1985, 1998), enabling them to illustrate “what people do when pursuing a good life in contemporary Denmark,” and to reflect on individuals’ “attempts at managing vulnerabilities by accepting, controlling and balancing tensions between self-making and relation-making.”

Several of my respondents stressed that the vulnerabilities of diasporic Ethiopians are largely a result of their racialized social locations as Black African immigrants. Most of them came through various refugee camps in Ethiopia's neighbouring countries of Sudan and Kenya in the 1980s and early 1990s, many fleeing persecution from the Ethiopian *Derg* regime. In the US, where race and racism shape people's life chances, most diasporic Ethiopians pursued a ‘good life’ and future while encountering systemic barriers that limited access to key resources, jobs with liveable wages and credit or loans. Like many other racialized groups, many worked (and still work) in low-wage menial and manual jobs that subjected them to various forms of exploitation and mistreatment. In the light of structural inequalities, exclusion, and marginalization, diasporic Ethiopians used *equbs* to manage their vulnerabilities (which were, and are, accentuated by US racism)⁷ and lift themselves out of poverty through *equb*-supported home- and future- making practices.

Equbs as Home- and Future- Making Practices

Equbs are both constitutive and accelerators of home- and future- making practices that work as ladders for development. Structurally, they are forms of social organization based on social ties of kinship and friendship. Trust based on kinship and friendship emerges as the most important organizing principle for *equbs* in LA and Seattle. “The formations and success of *equbs* depend on trust” (interview, 20 January 2023). I asked my interlocutors about the criteria and process through which individuals become leaders and members of an *equb* association. They all highlighted the importance of being trustworthy, hardworking, and visionary. With these three attributes that are the most recurring qualifications the interviewees used to explain the qualities that *equb* leaders and members must embody. Further, respondents defined good *equb* leaders and members in Amharic as, “*silewedefit yemyasebu, hiwot lemashashal yemialemu sewoch nachew*” (“people who have plans for the future have

⁷ See Butler (2005) and Shyong (2019).

aspirations to improve life”) (interview, 22 November 2022). These qualities resonate with Appadurai’s (2004) notion of the “capacity to aspire.”

One *equb* organizer noted:

Most people approach you to join an *equb* with some kind of ideas, plans for improving their lives. As I mentioned at the beginning, the main purpose for people to join the *equb* was to *improve their lives* [emphasis added]. People do not join an *equb* just for the sake of joining it. If you are an *equb* organizer, you cannot allow anyone to join your *equb*. You have to be very careful and selective in order to avoid problems such as default. You do not want someone to take the lump sum, which is other people’s money, and disappear on you, or not be able to repay. So there is a lot of vetting going on here. When someone was proposed who I did not know about, in terms of their history, background, and character, I did not accept them as a member, unless someone else who I knew vouched for him or her “*Bahiriachewen maweķe wesagne new*” (“knowing their characters is critical”). (Interview, 12 June 2022)

Another *equb* leader echoed the significance of vetting based on trust, declaring, “Trust is our collateral guarantee. For anyone to join my *equb*, either I must know them well personally or they have to come through my friends or other people who I trust....” It is revealing that this *equb* leader invoked the term “collateral guarantee,” which is a mechanism by which formal financial institutions ensure that their borrowers will pay back the money they lend them by linking the loans to other assets, properties, and businesses owned by the borrowers, for example. But for diasporic Ethiopians (and other people in similar social positions), having no collateral guarantee that formal banks will accept means not obtaining loans from banks and credit companies. In contrast, *equbs* (and ROSCAs more broadly) work as a form of bank using trust as a collateral guarantee. This trust is based on relationships that enable *equb* members to invest in people (each other) and to ensure repayment of *equb*-based loans. The characteristic assets embedded in social relations replace economic (material) assets in *equb* models.

The capacity to aspire and be trusted is also underscored by members of *equbs*. One of my interlocutors described the criteria as follows:

Whenever I join an *equb*, *I have a plan to improve things* [emphasis added]. I have *a vision for the future*. When you tell *equb* leaders that you have a plan, they want to help you achieve your goal. But they have to view you as a person who plans for the future. Very important. Very important...

Equb leadership and membership depend on trustworthiness. Due to elections, there is always a change in committee members, that is, the leaders of the *equb*. But everybody knows everybody else. Members would not elect someone who is not trustworthy (*abalate yemiamenute sew eza lie aysekemetum*). The same is true for people who are joining the *equb*, and who are taking the *equb*. When you receive *equb*, they have to trust you. Since people’s characters are known in the community, members and leaders know the who’s who of *equb* community members. If you

have a fishy character or a bad reputation in the community, people tell on you. They [*equb* leaders] will make you wait until the end of *equb*, that is when you can have the lump sum. (Interview, 22 November 2022)

In response to my follow-up question about what constitutes a “bad reputation” in the community, this interlocutor characterized people with a bad reputation as “people who are not trustworthy, not hard workers, who spend their money on drinking a lot, who do not get along with people in the community.” He added: “For example, you do not want a *seḳaram sew* [a drunkard] in your *equb*. You know the proverb *seḳaram bet ayeseram* (a drunkard cannot build a house/home/family).” These testimonies illustrate the criteria through which both *equb* leadership and membership are accessed. They also speak to the members’ perspectives on *equbs* as vital resources and tools for building a stable house/home/family, which is a metaphor for a ‘good life’, and the future.

The above testimonies provide insights into the philosophy, vision, values, and inner workings of *equb* associations as technologies of the ‘good life.’ As stated earlier, Shikur and his co-organizers (of the first *equb* in LA) recruited forty members into their association based on the three most important criteria: being trustworthy, hardworking, and visionary. Like Shikur, the majority of the recruited members for this pioneering *equb* were taxi drivers. The organizers called a founding meeting attended by most of the *equb* members at which they discussed and approved the association’s bylaws, which are called *yequb denb* in Amharic. The bylaws contained rules and regulations governing the business of collecting and distributing money through an *equb* association, including the election of leaders, the frequency and duration of meetings, contributions, the distribution of the lump sum, and safeguarding against fraud. At that first meeting, the members elected Shikur and his two friends as their leaders and decided to hold a one-hour weekly *equb* meeting on Sundays, between 1 P.M. and 2 P.M., at which members were required to pay their weekly contributions.

They also agreed on the amounts of the weekly contributions, which are known in Amharic as *eta* (prize). There were (and still are) two types of prizes: one is a full prize (*mulu eta*) and the other is a half prize (*gimash eta*). The agreed full prize was USD 500 a week and the half prize was USD 250 a week. The total lump sum for the first *equb* was USD 16,000, which later increased to USD 20,000. Every week, one member received the lump sum until the *equb* cycle ended. According to the respondents, most members contributed a full prize per week, but they also created a half prize for those members who could not afford the full prize independently and partnered with another member who was not able to pay USD 500 a week. The pairs or partners contributed USD 250/week each, which added up to a full prize. When partners received

the lump sum, they split the amount. Most members paid these full and partial *equb* contributions to collectors (*equb* leaders) on time at the weekly meetings in the restaurant. Some arranged with the leaders to pay their prizes prior to or after the *equb* meetings. They included people who got there biweekly or monthly, taxi or Uber drivers who were delayed due to traffic and would not be able to make it to the meeting in time, and people who were travelling. This illustrates the fact that *equbs* provide members with more flexibility and accommodation than formal institutions like modern banks. This is one of the comparative advantages of *equbs*.

Most importantly, unlike modern banks, *equbs* give members unique access to credit and loans with no interest. One of my interviewees proudly stated “*hiwotachene lemashashal yerasachen yehon bahilawi bank feterine*” (“we created our own traditional bank to achieve our goals of improving our lives”) (interview, 18 June 2022). The *equb* stories I collected provide useful insights into how such rare access to credit is managed, how the contributions are distributed in the form of a lump sum among the *equb* members, and who receives priority for receiving the lump sum and why. In local parlance, people who received the lump sum are described as “*equb bella*,” (eating *equb*) or “*eta wetalet, eta asheneffe*,” (winning a prize/bid/lottery).

When discussing how they allocated the *equb* lump sum, one *equb* leader stated:

People who came to me and the secretary and *equb* members with clear ideas about how they were going to use the money, we gave them priority. These people did not have to wait for their turn. As long as we trusted them, we gave them the *equb* lump sum at the beginning. That way they got a loan of a big chunk of money without any bureaucratic hurdles (*yaleminim wetawered*), and with no interest. *That way people improved their lives* [emphasis added]. Where could they get that much money that easy? Nowhere! As you know, *banks were not willing to lend us money without collateral* [emphasis added]. Now, they do lend to us because we have collateral. (Interview, 12 June 2022)

Individuals with the capacity to aspire to a ‘good life’ and future therefore receive special treatment from *equb* leaders. I asked one of them about what type of “clear ideas” people had shared with him and his co-*equb* leaders that warranted priority treatment in “eating *equb*,” receiving a lump sum early on. In response, he provided the following insights:

People shared all kinds of plans. Some who were employed as taxi drivers had plans to save money to purchase their own taxis. They wanted to become taxi owners themselves. By the way, most of our *equb* members at this early stage of the *equb* were taxi drivers who were employed by several taxi companies such as Independent Taxis and United Taxis... Some people who were working at Indian or Korean grocery stores wanted to save money to open their own grocery stores. Some people wanted *equb* to buy a house or property... (Interview, 12 June 2022)

The story about giving priority to people with clear ideas, visions, and plans is a recurring theme in the interview materials. However, accounts by non-leader *equb* members reveal that the *equb* leaders enjoy top priority status, as the first three lump sums go to the judge, secretary, and treasurer of *equbs*, respectively, if and when they want to take the lump sums. According to these accounts, people with clear ideas rank second to the *equb* leaders when it comes to prioritizing access to credit. The third and most important mechanism by which leaders allocate the lump sums is through *eta mewedader*; that is, “bidding or drawing lots.” *Etas* are pieces of paper on which names of all the *equb* members who have not yet received the lump sum bid for credit. The *equb* leaders prepare the *etas* and put them in a container (usually a hat) and randomly select someone to draw one of the *etas*. The name on the drawn *eta* is the winner, and will receive the lump sum. This procedure of one member receiving the lump sum every week continues until the end of the *equb* – that is, until all the members have received the lump sum. Then they start a new *equb* all over again, with or without modified amounts of contributions, lump sums, and size of membership.

As in my example of the *equb* in LA, the *equb* in Seattle follows similar procedures for managing access to credit, lump sums, and priorities. However, it is radically different from the one in LA in terms of its leadership and membership. Here, the *equb* leadership roles are gendered. While the LA *equb* has three leaders (the judge, secretary, and finance person), who are always all males, the Seattle *equb* that I studied has a single female leader. Werdiwet has been the leader of her *equb* since its inception. She said:

Mine is different. It is a one woman show. I am the president, secretary, and finance head all at once. I do it all without any payment, for free. But the one benefit I get from this free leadership work is that I always take the first lump sum. That is a big advantage I have. (Interview, 20 January 2023)

This is a unique and interesting development that provides useful insights into the gendered nature of *equbs* among diasporic Ethiopian communities in the US. Even though *equbs* were historically village women’s inventions, to my knowledge, the leadership and membership of many *equbs*, especially large ones, have been male dominated. The Seattle *equb* has reversed this long-established trend in the world of *equbs*, both in Ethiopia and among the diasporic Ethiopian communities. Like its leadership, the Seattle *equb*’s membership is gendered in that it is led by a female leader, initially with an all-female membership. Men joined later, but women still form the majority of the membership. Werdiwet described this unique aspect:

I started this *equb* with six close female friends of mine. Once I decided to start an *equb*, I approached them because I know them personally and I know that they know the value of *equb*, that *equb* is our shared history and culture.

So, I shared my vision for improving my life through *equb* and they expressed similar aspirations and goals. *Meshashel yemifelig manale?* (“Who does not want to improve their lives?”). I want to be better off, and they want to be better off, so we formed the first *equb* with an individual contribution of 2,000 dollars every six months. That one ended smoothly, without any problems. I took the first lump sum, with which I entered the world of real estate business. Over the last three to four years, the individual contributions grew to 3,000 dollars, then to 4,000 dollars, and then to 5,000 dollars every six months. Now, it is 10,000 dollars every six months. If an individual cannot afford to pay the full prize or contributions, they can partner with someone else. I have members who share the prize with their sister, brother, or friend. Also, I have a couple of members where one person has two prizes, with a lump sum of 120,000 dollars. (Interview, 20 January 2023)

The Seattle *equb* is different from the LA *equb* in two other important ways, in terms of the occupational characteristics of their memberships and how they pay their regular individual contributions. First, Werdiwet told me that the members of her *equb* are all professionals with formal training, mostly in health care, including nurses and a couple of doctors.⁸ “I do not have taxi drivers or people working at seven-eleven in my *equb*,” she said. Werdiwet also highlighted how their payment system is also professional, in that members pay their contributions through formal banks, and likewise, Werdiwet transfers the lump sums to the prize winners via bank transactions.

In contrast, many of my interlocutors in LA told me that the LA *equb* membership is largely composed of cab drivers and storekeepers, with a few professional members (some of whom are local and state government employees). Unlike the members of the Seattle *equb*, most of the LA *equb* members make their regular payments in cash and in person at the weekly *equb* meetings, where the three leaders collect the contributions. However, there have been times, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some members have paid their *equb* contributions through banks and various digital financial platforms. In the post-COVID-19 period, the members resumed payments in cash and in person.

Illustrating Uses of *Equbs* in the Diaspora

As presented above, diasporic Ethiopians in LA and Seattle join *equbs* with clear ideas about their futures, building their well-being and ‘good lives.’ They envision better lives and futures for themselves and their (transnational and trans-local) families being achieved through *equbs*, one of their cultural capacities to aspire that is deeply rooted in their homeland culture and history,

⁸ However, these claims about professionalism seem to leave out the educational backgrounds of some cab drivers and storekeepers, who came from Ethiopia with advanced degrees in various fields and were not able to find jobs in their fields, and who now participate in *equbs* in the diaspora.

which signifies the importance of home in making homes in the diaspora. One interlocutor benefitted from *equb* priorities due to his clear visions and plans, and told the story of his own development through *equb*:

[...] I was working as a taxi driver when I joined an *equb* for the first time in my entire life because I wanted to buy a taxi in partnership with my friend, half a taxi each. In *equb*, when you start new work and a new business, you get the first prize [the lump sum of *equb*]. If you have an idea, if you have a vision, if you want to do something important for your life, if you work hard, then *equb* is like a ladder for development. With this vision, I joined an existing *equb*. I consulted the judges, and I shared my goal of purchasing a taxi. They said you can have the first prize, according to our bylaws. That is what the first paragraph of the *equb* bylaws says, especially for people who want to start a new business. *That is one of its primary goals* [emphasis added]. I purchased my first taxi using the first prize of 20,000 dollars, in partnership with my friend. The taxi cost us about 53,000 dollars, which we split between us. My friend and I agreed that I should drive our new taxi, as he already had his own taxi which he was driving. (Interview, 22 November 2022)

This story reveals the workings of *equbs* as technologies of the ‘good life’ and a better future. This interviewee’s development did not stop with the purchase of his first taxi. Using *equb* as a goal-directed saving and investment, he said that he saved money from being the driver and co-owner of his taxi and working long hours, with no holidays and limited sleep. He paid off the first *equb* debt and joined a new one, and purchased another taxi that he owned in full. He also became the sole owner of his first taxi by paying his friend off. Subsequently, he bought his third taxi and employed a fellow Ethiopian as his driver, becoming an owner of three taxis, all by using *equbs*. He also told me that the *equb* leaders made him wait his turn to bid for the *equb* prizes (lump sums) he used to buy his second and third taxis. Similarly, one of the leaders of the *equb* also used *equb* money to purchase his own taxis. According to the leader in LA, because of the *equb* he pioneered, about 45-50 people have become owners of various businesses, mostly taxis, restaurants, grocery stores, and liquor stores.⁹ He says: “We created our own banking system (*yerasachen bahilawi bank fetirene*). First, our people used our bank to buy taxis, then to purchase property, mostly residential houses, then grocery stores, then restaurants, etc. Because of these *equb* benefits, *equb* expanded in LA and subsequently throughout the US” (interview, 12 June 2022).

The Seattle *equb* members followed similar patterns of using *equbs* for business and wealth creation. Werdiwet, the *equb* leader in Seattle, said, “Many

⁹ Aside from LA, taxi-driving was a niche occupation for many diasporic Ethiopians in several cities, including San Jose, Seattle, Dallas, and Washington, D.C., where many evolved from being employed cab drivers to driver-owners and owners of their own taxis. On taxi driving as a niche among diasporic Ethiopians in Washington, D.C., see Chacko (2016).

of us in this *equb* are women. Almost all of us are now engaged in businesses in health care (some are nurses running elderly care and daycare centres with licenses), and the real-estate sector thanks to my *equb*” (interview, 20 January 2023).

Ethiopians also use *equbs* to purchase residential and rental properties. For example, two brothers partnered to build two large houses (one with six bedrooms and the other with five) on land in a prime location in Los Angeles that they purchased, both using multiple *equb* prizes/lump sums. The houses are now worth several million dollars each. An *equb* leader in Seattle told me that she bought her first house using *equb* and had an idea for a business in real estate from her experience with purchasing a home. “I really struggled to pay my rent before. Now I have established a home for my son and myself, and I own multiple rental properties. *Equb* has liberated me” (interview, 20 January 2023). Similarly, after he purchased a residential home and his third taxi, one of my interviewees purchased a town home in partnership with his friend for USD 110,000, which they have been renting. According to the interviewee, the market value of this town house in November 2022 was about USD 450,000. Subsequently, as the rise in shared transportation such as Uber began to marginalize the taxi-driving business, the interlocutor sold two of his taxis for a good price (a total of USD 165,000), which he used to buy land in Addis Ababa, where he built a six-bedroom three-story house, which he has been renting. In a similar manner, another interlocutor used multiple *equb* prizes that he saved over several years to purchase land in Addis Ababa, on which he built a nine-story apartment building. Four other interlocutors also told me that they had built various businesses and proprietorships back in Ethiopia. A total of six of my twelve interlocutors created homes, businesses, rental properties, and good lives and futures, both in the US and in Ethiopia.

Equbs also go beyond forms of home- and future- making to forms of community formation. They have been instrumental for some members for starting various businesses, including Ethiopian restaurants and stores, the concentration of which paved the way for the emergence of Little Ethiopia in LA. As a result, there are currently thirteen Ethiopian-owned businesses there, of which eight are restaurants. This concentration gave birth to Little Ethiopia, which was officially named in 2002, with its own demarcation on Fairfax Avenue between Pico and Olympic, complete with the “Little Ethiopia” street banners that are installed at each entrance to the neighbourhood. Little Ethiopia would not exist without *equb*.

These uses of *equbs* are not exclusive to Ethiopians. Other groups (including Cambodians, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese) have used their versions of ROSCAs as ‘technologies’ of the ‘good life’ and future through which they build entrepreneurship and communities. Frank Shyong, a journalist who writing about diversity and diasporas for the LA Times, aptly titled

a column, “Excluded by banks, minorities in California became their own lenders,” in which he assessed the role of ROSCAs in immigrants’ lives and creating communities as follows:

In Los Angeles, diverse neighbourhoods probably wouldn’t exist today without ROSCAs, which are most often run by women. When banks wouldn’t lend to minorities, the kye helped Koreatown business owners cluster in central Los Angeles. The hui helped finance Chinatown, and tanomoshis helped start some of Little Tokyo’s early businesses. There are also Latino tandas or cundinas, Filipino paluwagans and Ethiopian ekubs, and in South Los Angeles, family investment teams were formed after the L.A. riots to help black people buy property. (Shyong 2019)

Scholars also observed that the instrumentality of transplanted homeland cultural elements such as ROSCAs, religion, and music for embarking upon a journey of crafting the ‘good life’ and a better future is common among other diasporic communities. For example, Goitom and Indemudia (2022) have carried out an ethnographic examination of the intersections between faith and what they call “post-migration aspirations,” with a focus on how Ethiopian immigrants (in Toronto, Canada) deployed their faith (and communities such as *mahbars* – religious organizations – and *iddirs* (traditional insurance systems) among Ethiopians) to improve their lot and forge transnational belonging.¹⁰ They aptly note “prayer as multi-local social capital,” which can be viewed as a discursive future-making practice (2022, 13–16).¹¹ Similarly, drawing on her ethnographic research on the ‘good life’ among Aymara migrants in the city of El Alto, Bolivia, Calestani (2008) examined how the Aymara rural-urban migrants used a range of sociocultural resources (namely religion) that constituted their capabilities to advance their wellbeing.

Conclusion

These *equb* stories are not a typical rags-to-riches story. The multi-pronged applications of *equbs* (including for creating entrepreneurship, property ownership, and wealth) are what Appadurai (2004, 82) dubbed ‘a meta capacity,’ with multiplying effects, generating diasporic Ethiopians’ other capacities to aspire to entrepreneurship, and through which they built it. As “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1942), entrepreneurship has a lot to do with the future. Using *equbs* to create business enterprises translates into a home- and future-making process, which in turn leads to the creation of homes, wealth,

¹⁰ For how *iddirs* function among Ethiopians in Southern California, see Thubauville’s article in this volume. ¹¹ Elsewhere, I examined the role of religious teachings in (re)constructing translocal and transnational identities among diasporic Ethiopians in LA, see Nida (2007). On how diasporic Ethiopians in Toronto use discursive/linguistic and musical resources in advancing their psychological wellbeing, see Goitom (2019).

identity, and communities such as Little Ethiopia, which symbolize homeland in the diaspora.¹²

This narrative I have created from the various *equb* stories demonstrates how diasporic Ethiopians have used *equbs* as ‘technologies’ to construct the ‘good life’ and futures by funding entrepreneurial activities that have given birth to successful business enterprises and communities. I have shown how *equbs* work and worked as ‘technologies’ of the ‘good life’ and future, which constitutes home- and future-making, and in so doing, I have highlighted the entrepreneurial feats of the hardworking diasporic Ethiopians as they made the transition from underpaid wage labourers to labour-intensive, capital-scarce businesses such as driving taxi cabs, and become successful workers-owners of ethnic restaurants both in LA and Seattle. *Equbs* have given them an increased sense of agency, which gives them the ability to craft their ‘good lives’ and futures, overcoming barriers to accessing capital from formal banks and credit markets, and broadly becoming and being in charge of their destinies and agency of change.

I have analysed Ethiopian business enterprises and Little Ethiopia as forms of a ‘good life’ and future, showing how *equb*-induced feats such as Little Ethiopia have altered LA’s landscape and diasporic Ethiopians’ terms of reference (Appadurai 2004) in both public and media and state and official narratives (from stories of poverty to success), with official insignias locally and globally, putting their cultures and countries’ names on the maps.

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¹² For a geographic description of Little Ethiopia as a form of enclave, see Chacko and Cheung (2011).

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Sophia Thubauville

Final(ly) Home: Ethiopian Insurance Associations and Burials in the US

Insurance associations are important networks of care and solidarity in Ethiopia. They focus above all on the financing and organization of the burials of their members. Even in the Ethiopian diaspora, in countries with diversified formal insurances such as the US, these networks are organized and adapted to local requirements and needs.

The article describes the formation and current development of insurance associations in the Ethiopian diaspora in the US. By focusing on these associations, it asks which contribution these networks make to the future of the Ethiopian diaspora in the US. It argues that by discussing the burial place vs. the posthumous transnationalism of members of the Ethiopian diaspora, the future orientation of the diaspora becomes apparent.

Keywords: burial, insurance association, burial place, restitution, home-making

Introduction

Insurance associations (Amharic: *iddir*, Oromifa: *affoosha*) are important networks of care and solidarity in Ethiopia. They focus above all on the financing and organization of burials of their members. Even in the Ethiopian diaspora, in countries with diversified formal insurances such as the US, these networks are organized and adapted to local requirements and needs.

In this article, I describe the formation and current development of insurance associations in the Ethiopian diaspora in the US. By focusing on these associations, I ask what contribution these networks make to the future of the Ethiopian diaspora in the US, and argue that burial, which is organized and financed by these associations, is an important indication of home-making, and burial places are markers that connect the past with the future. By discussing the burial place vs. the posthumous transnationalism of members of the Ethiopian diaspora, the future orientation of the diaspora becomes apparent.

I start by describing the centrality of burials as life-cycle events in Ethiopia. Since they are organized so extensively and have so many attendees, insurance

associations are needed to organize and finance them. I continue with an overview of how these associations work in Ethiopia, and then discuss the history, tasks, and activities of insurance associations of people of Ethiopian descent in Southern California, more specifically in Los Angeles and San Diego. Finally, I show how these associations actively contribute to a future-making of the Ethiopian diaspora in this part of the world by focusing on the burial places of their members.

Like the other articles in this special issue, the objective of this article is to offer an insight into how Ethiopian migrants in the US try to achieve a ‘good life’ (Robbins 2013; Fischer 2014) and a ‘good future.’¹ By organizing and adapting insurance associations based on the Ethiopian model, Ethiopians in the US connect with their homeland and at the same time integrate into the host society. Accordingly, activities in these associations are not merely survival strategies, but are integral to their aspirations for a ‘good life,’ a ‘good future,’ and to finally making a new home in the US.

My research was carried out within the DFG-funded project “On the Saf(v)e Side: Informal Economic Associations and Future Aspirations in the Ethiopian Diaspora” in the summers of 2021 and 2022.² I spent a total of four months in Los Angeles and San Diego in Southern California, where I led qualitative interviews with various members of the Ethiopian diaspora and expert interviews with key figures in the associations being studied. The by-laws of the associations also helped me understand the limits and boundaries of these groups.³

The larger Los Angeles area is home to an estimated 70,000–80,000 people of Ethiopian origin, and San Diego has a community of about 10,000. Los Angeles not only has a higher number of residents of Ethiopian origin, but Central Los Angeles even has the first ethnically-designated enclave of Ethiopians in the US: “Little Ethiopia” (Chacko & Cheung 2011). It consists of two blocks in which Ethiopian restaurants and businesses are lined up next to each other, and street signs, flags, and paintings on power boxes remind passers-by

¹ See Appadurai (2013) and Strathern (2005) on the concept of future in anthropology. According to Strathern (2005), people’s present actions are at all times informed by as yet-unrealized possible worlds. ² The author has carried out field research in Ethiopia in several areas since 2004. This project took place in cooperation with the University of Hawassa, Ethiopia. Talking about past research in Ethiopia and cooperation with the Ethiopian university was very helpful when it came to building trust with the interlocutors. ³ The majority of my informants were first-generation immigrants to the US. In Ethiopia, people become members of insurance associations when they start their own families. Most second-generation Ethiopians in the US have not reached this stage in their lives yet.



Figure 2. Street view of an Ethiopian restaurant in San Diego.

According to Joel Robbins, therefore, Ethiopian funerals can be defined as a “ritual accomplishment of a value.” Robbins writes that ideal values are hard to enact in everyday life, and are therefore enacted in rituals. Even if they are marked or performed at the end of a life, funerals as life-cycle rituals “enact an idealized picture of the world” (Robbins 2018, 188) in which everybody cares for one another. Bruce Kapferer’s definition is also pertinent to the excessive scale of funeral rituals among Ethiopians. He defines ritual as a space of virtuality that “allows people to break free from the constraints or determinations of everyday life,” not in order to leave everyday life and its concerns behind, but to “slow down its flux and speed” (2004, 47).

Something that burials all over Ethiopia have in common is that the deceased has to be buried quite quickly. Embalming and the digging of the grave in Ethiopia is mostly done by members of the insurance associations. Cremation, which is often performed in the US as an affordable alternative, is not acceptable among Ethiopians for religious reasons. Ethiopia is a religiously diverse country⁶ where religion plays an important role, and a funeral is always conducted by a priest or imam who performs religious rites. Burial must take

⁶ Currently, the population of Ethiopia is about 62% Christian (Orthodox, Evangelical Protestant, and Catholic), 35% Muslim, and 3-4% “traditional” (Abbink 2022).

place quickly, but performance of the rites is a prolonged affair, and takes several days. In the case of Christians, the mourning period for close relatives and friends can even last for 40 days. On the days following the burial, a large mourning party gathers in or in front of the mourning family's house, and the event is fully catered by the family and the supporting neighbours, which therefore entails a high cost for the bereaved family. Other details of the funeral rites can differ greatly among Ethiopia's different regions and ethnic groups (Kaplan 2003).

To be able to cover these costs, which are incurred because of the extensive mourning process, informal insurance associations (Amharic: *iddir*, Oromifa: *afioosha*) are popular in both urban and rural areas of Ethiopia. *Iddir* are typical risk-sharing arrangements that co-exist with other forms of mutual support networks, which provide assistance in labour and kind at the time of death, and can be considered to be the forerunners of *iddir* (Dejene Aredo 2010, 58). The specific aspect of the *iddir*, however, is that it functions on the basis of regular advance payments in cash, which is why Pankhurst dated its emergence back to the beginning of the 20th century in urban centres, where it resulted from the modernization and monetization of the economy, as well as urban migration (Pankhurst 2008, 144). The regular payments in cash accumulate in a pool of savings, and a payout of a fixed amount of money in the event of a death. In addition to these monetary benefits, *iddir* also provides utensils for the funeral service and services such as cooking and catering.

Compared to mutual support networks in the rural areas, *iddir* in urban areas are highly formalized: they keep lists of members, have written by-laws, hold regular meetings, impose fines for non-attendance or payment arrears, have different rules regarding payouts for the bereaved, and periodically elect executive committee members. Many also have specialized equipment such as tents, chairs, and tableware (Pankhurst 2008, 148). In addition to these basic rules and functions of *iddir*, some now have their own offices or conference halls, or even employ salaried staff such as guards (Pankhurst 2008, 166). Another more recent feature is that the application of *iddir* has been expanded to include health costs or the provision of loans. Today, they have been also recognized as effective tools for development activities or for assisting the health sector, such as through assistance with the campaign against HIV/AIDS (Pankhurst 2008, 143).

Iddir are known for their inclusiveness, and they are aimed at and accommodate all income levels, in part because the associations are organised by neighbourhood,⁷ and Ethiopian cities, especially Addis Ababa, have mixed settlements and no ghettos. The best sign of the *iddir*'s inclusiveness is its

⁷ Neighbourhood *iddirs* are therefore often called *yäsäffär* (neighbourhood) *iddir* (Elias Yitbarek Alemayehu 2008, 188).

prevalence rate: in Addis Ababa, it is at least 85 percent, and over 90 percent in some parts of the city. Some 40 percent of households belong to more than one *iddir* (Pankhurst 2008, 176).

Even within Ethiopia, as these details show, *iddir* are highly dynamic associations that have evolved and changed over a period of about a century, and constantly take on new forms and functions (Pankhurst 2008, 177).⁸ In the next paragraph, I will show how their new environment in Southern California has shaped them, and how they help people of Ethiopian origin there to navigate, enjoy a ‘good life,’ and make a future in their new surroundings.

The Rise of Ethiopian Insurance Associations in Southern California

For most members of the Ethiopian community in the US, it is important to organize funerals in their new country as far as possible according to their cultural norms. It is important to recall here that the Ethiopian diaspora in the US is comparatively recent: even though the first few Ethiopian students remained in the US when Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974, most arrived after 2000 through chain migration. This means that people of Ethiopian origin who are faced with the task of organizing a funeral are mainly first-generation migrants.⁹

However, even though the Ethiopian diaspora in Southern California is quite new, they have already been able to establish an important infrastructure in their new surroundings. Apart from the “Little Ethiopia” enclave, with its Ethiopian shops and restaurants that provide Ethiopian food, clothing, music, and films for the whole metropolitan area, several churches have been established in the course of recent decades. Both Los Angeles and San Diego have several Ethiopian Orthodox and Protestant Churches, many of which have their own buildings and several hundred members.¹⁰ Ethiopian Muslims, on the other hand, attend mosques with members from different backgrounds. In addition to the visible infrastructure of the Ethiopian community like shops and churches, associations such as the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America (<https://esfna.org/>) or the Ethiopian Community Los Angeles (<https://www.eclosangeles.org/>) are important for the cohesion of the diaspora community and its social and cultural life.¹¹

⁸ For a broad overview of the history, spread, and diversity of the *iddir* in Ethiopia, see the annotated bibliography on Ethiopian *iddir* by Deslagen, Bisaillon, and Yordanos (2020). ⁹ For more information on the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States, see the introduction to this volume. ¹⁰ For Ethiopian churches in Southern California, see also Nida (2007). ¹¹ I only mention these two associations as examples. There are Ethiopian cultural clubs in every US city that has a large Ethiopian population, and there are numerous other sports associations, especially football clubs.

In their new surroundings in the US, people of Ethiopian origin find totally different customs and conditions from their motherland Ethiopia when it comes to funerals. As explained above, cremation, which is today a common inexpensive alternative in the US, is not an option for Ethiopians for religious reasons. Burial plots in US cities, on the other hand, are very expensive – they cost around 10,000 US Dollars when I was doing my research in Southern California. Services like embalming, which are offered by funeral homes, add to the high costs of funerals in the US, while in Ethiopia they are offered for free by *iddir* associations.

Most people of Ethiopian origin have many family members left in Ethiopia even though their closest kin, like spouses and children, are in the US. The decision of where to have a funeral and bury a body is therefore not an easy one, and while some people choose to be buried in the US, others express the wish during their lifetime to be buried in their home country. Their body will then be repatriated, and there will be another mourning ceremony in Ethiopia.

Proximity to the surviving family members speaks in favour of a funeral in the US, of course, but there are also several reasons to be buried in Ethiopia. First of all, there is an Ethiopian saying that you should be buried where your umbilical cord is buried; secondly, people might have more family members in Ethiopia than in the US; thirdly, there are people who never wanted to live abroad but were forced to for political reasons, and at least want to be buried in their motherland; and finally, some people might choose to be buried in a holy place, like a famous monastery in Ethiopia.

Both options – burial in the US or repatriation to Ethiopia – are expensive, and require the help from others to carry them out, for example, to prepare large quantities of Ethiopian food or to share knowledge of the bureaucracy surrounding repatriation. Ethiopian insurance associations are therefore needed at least for two purposes in the US: to share the financial burden of the burial or repatriation and to help with organizational and bureaucratic matters.

According to my informants' narratives, organizing burials was especially hard when the community was smaller and there were no associations, although there were not as many deaths back then because the new immigrants were usually young. If someone died in the new host country, far away from home and away from their extended family, the owners of Ethiopian shops and restaurants took charge. As funerals in the Ethiopian community are supposed to take place within 24 hours, only businesspeople were in a position to provide large amounts of cash so quickly. The money was then returned to the businesspersons by posting notices in their shops and restaurants providing information about the death boxes for collecting money. If the deceased had family members, they also collected contributions from the Ethiopian community at appropriate locations (like airports, where many Ethiopian cab

drivers can be found). A. described this way of collecting contributions as follows:

They put a box in the house where the people lived, or else people had to go all over Ethiopian markets and restaurants and to airports and hotels asking the taxi drivers to help. They also asked grocery customers to help out. (A., 26 July 2021)

The GoFundMe online platform can be compared to this earlier way of funding funerals in Southern California, and is still used in areas of the US where no insurance associations are available. Many people of Ethiopian origin who do not belong to insurance association, collect the expenses for funerals and repatriating their relatives by crowdfunding on this platform.

Prior to 2010, there were only few insurance associations with small numbers of members that made payouts in the US in general, and in Southern California in particular. Los Angeles, for example, only had one *iddir* at the time: it had been founded in 1992 and only had 44 members, all of whom were close friends. After 2010, the Ethiopian population not only increased in number and became older, but was also better established in their host country. Today, it includes more professionals, who can deal easily with US bureaucracies, which is why it became possible for them to establish *iddir* based on the Ethiopian model and register them as associations under US law.¹²

Today, Los Angeles and San Diego each have five *iddir*. About half are organized by churches (both Ethiopian Orthodox and Protestant), and at least one in each city has more than 1,000 members. In order to manage so many members and comply with US law, these groups are highly formalized: they keep lists of members, have written by-laws, hold regular meetings, impose fines for payment arrears, have different rules on payouts to the bereaved, and periodically elect executive committee members.

The services provided by these *iddir* are extensive and precisely tailored to the needs of the Ethiopian community in the US. As G. explained:

[...] You take care of your mourning and we take care of the other business - inviting people, feeding them, collecting money, getting the death certificate, and sending the body to Ethiopia or Eritrea by cargo. Have you ever heard of a life insurance company that would do all that? [...] This is a lot more than insurance. (G., 23 July 2021)

Several informants drew this same parallel with life insurances. Still, just as many people are members of several *iddir* in the US as well as back in Ethiopia, many members of *iddir* also have a life insurance policy. Compared to other

¹² Most Ethiopian *iddir* are 501(c) organizations, which means they are a US corporation, trust, unincorporated association or other type of organization exempt from federal income tax.

policies, which cost a three-digit sum every month, *iddir* are also less expensive: some charge a monthly fee of about 20 US dollars, while others collect a fee of about 25 US dollars per death.

When comparing *iddir* in Ethiopia to those in the US, members mostly mentioned the issue of time. While people in Ethiopia would mourn together for days and weeks in the company of members of their *iddir*, solidarity with mourning Ethiopians in the US was more seen as sharing the financial costs of the loss.

But the place where we live in Western society, you know, it's busy. We don't have time. So the only means we have is to give them [the mourning family] financial assistance. (F., 22 July 2021)

Of course, the *iddir* provides food and a place where mourners can come together, but as people still have to continue working, this social part of mourning is much reduced compared to Ethiopia. The socializing aspect of members has been adapted to their new environment, in which people are very busy at work and sometimes live a long way from each other, as this information on the website¹³ of an *iddir* shows:

We aren't looking to run this association as it is run back home in Ethiopia. Instead, we can utilize the internet (e-mail) for communication, the banking system for paying our contributions, and conference meetings as needed to make collective decisions. Information can pass by e-mail between members or to all members, contributions can be paid to the association account by each individual member at his/her convenience, and most meetings can be done without members leaving their living room.

As mentioned above, apart from time, space is also a factor that varies when it comes to organizing Ethiopian funerals in the US. While *iddir* associations in Ethiopia are mostly neighbourhood-based, those in Southern California are mostly open to people from an entire metropolitan catchment area. This leads to a situation in which firstly, the members of the associations do not all know each other, and secondly, due to the long distances, not all of them can attend all their association's funerals, as is the case in Ethiopia.

I will now use the example of one *iddir* to illustrate the similarities and differences between associations in the US and Ethiopia. Dir Byabir is the *iddir* that has changed most features in comparison to *iddir* back in Ethiopia and has adapted the most to the circumstances Ethiopians face in their new home in the US. It was founded in Los Angeles in 2014, and by 2021 had 1,369 active members. Including dependents, therefore, it covers 10,000 Ethiopians in

¹³ "About Hibret Edir Association." <https://www.hibretedir.com/about>.

Los Angeles and its surroundings. After an initial admission fee, members do not pay a regular fee, but are asked to contribute 25 US dollars in the event a member dies. This payment per loss and not on a regular basis is already one major difference from *iddir* in Ethiopia. The deceased person's family then receives 20,000 US dollars, which they use to pay for the various expenses surrounding the funeral. The *iddir* offers the family help with all organizational matters. However, the family is free to decide how to organize the funeral and what help and advice they need. The chairperson of the *iddir* emphasized that unlike in Ethiopia, members do not have many obligations apart from payment. The payments are regarded as very affordable, and are often compared to prices for coffee at Starbucks or food from fast food chains. Everyone is supposed to contribute this comparatively small amount of money towards covering the burial costs of a deceased member even if they do not know them. Because not all the members know each other anyway but a large amount of money can be collected quickly because of the large number of members, this particular *iddir* has the advantage that it can also very easily extend its solidarity to non-members. This was described by the chairperson as "we leave no one behind," meaning that the *iddir* feels responsible for the whole Ethiopian community in Los Angeles, not just those who became members of the *iddir* before they died. Of the 136 people the *iddir* has buried to date, 9 were non-members. This is also a difference from Ethiopia, where associations only take care of their members. Because this large size of *iddir* has been so successful in Los Angeles, it has already been adapted with the same regulations, and sometimes even under the same name, in 13 other states. In this way, the community activists not only want to extend the safety net *iddir* offers to all Ethiopians in the whole US, but they also make sure that if people move from one city to another they can easily move their membership to their new place of residence.

Making and Marking a Future in the United States

I will now examine how people of Ethiopian origin shape a new future in their new homeland with the help of these associations. This can be answered in different ways. Above all, Ethiopian ideas and ideals about a cultural normative burial are passed on amongst the members of the *iddir*, and then also to a second generation that has never, or has only rarely, experienced burials inside Ethiopia. These associations also contribute to a strong, independent, self-confident diaspora community by strengthening solidarity amongst its members.¹⁴

¹⁴ I discuss the solidarity that is the basis of *iddir* in the US in a separate article (Thubauville 2024).

Apart from the transmission of cultural norms and group solidarity, however, I want to answer these questions: Where are community members buried? Do *iddir* influence the burial place of their community members? How does the burial place of community members influence the future of the diaspora community?

As I noted above, members of the Ethiopian diaspora in the US have two options when it comes to burial places. The deceased person (during their lifetime) or their family members (after their death) may decide to be buried in a US graveyard or repatriated to Ethiopia. According to information I gathered at the Ethiopian Consulate in Los Angeles in July 2020, and from the *iddir* organizations I interviewed in Los Angeles and San Diego, it is possible to roughly estimate that 85% of people of Ethiopian origin are buried in the US, while 15% are repatriated to Ethiopia and buried there.

All *iddir* associations, no matter whether they are organized by a Christian church or interreligious, facilitate both options. They help the deceased person's family members obtain a space in a cemetery in the US for a reasonable price, make contact with undertakers, and assist with the other bureaucracy surrounding the burial. Some have even purchased their own plots in US graveyards and provide cemetery space at a reduced rate and on a common plot for their deceased members. If an *iddir* does not have its own plot, it may help the deceased's family to identify a graveyard in which other members of the Ethiopian diaspora have been buried, as it was made clear in several interviews that people prefer graveyards where other members of the Ethiopian diaspora have already been interred. In cases where the deceased mentioned a wish to be buried in Ethiopia during their lifetime, the *iddir* contacts undertakers who specialize in repatriations and help with the bureaucracy surrounding transporting bodies back to Ethiopia to be buried there. No matter which option the family of the deceased decides on, *iddir* associations make the same payout to the family and let them decide by themselves how the family wants to spend the funds, and in which country the burial will be.

In thinking about the issue of burial for members of a diaspora population, I have mainly been influenced by the works of Adrián Félix (2011, 2019), who works on Mexican migrants in California, and Osman Balkan (2015, 2022, 2023), who does research on Turkish migrants in Germany. Both authors focus on the repatriation of deceased migrants to their home countries. In the case of Mexicans in the US, the Mexican House of Congress provided consulates with funds specifically for subsidizing posthumous repatriations carried out through the consulates (Félix 2011, 116). Turkish migrants in Germany are organized into burial societies similar to the Ethiopian *iddir*. However, unlike the Ethiopian version, Turkish burial societies' funds do not pay for any of the burial expenses (such as the cemetery plot, the municipal

cemetery fees, and the purchase of a coffin and a tombstone) if the member is to be interred in a German cemetery (Balkan 2022, 25), and only pay out for repatriation to Turkey. As a consequence, according to Balkan, Muslim undertakers estimate that only around 20% to 30% of individuals of Turkish and Kurdish descent are buried in Berlin, and 70% to 80% are repatriated to Turkey for burial. Members of funeral societies are repatriated at an even higher rate, around 95% (Balkan 2023). It can be said, therefore, that both the Mexican state and Turkish funeral societies promote necro-patriotism, an affirmation of one's connection to the nation of one's birth even after death.

But what makes the place of burial so important and so controversial for members of a diaspora population? Many people, like those of Ethiopian or Mexican origin in the US or those of Turkish origin in Germany, lead a transnational life, crossing borders regularly and maintaining strong connections to family, friends, and business partners in their countries of origin. However, at the end of life, people cannot longer interact across borders. Balkan (2015, 124) expresses this very well when he says "The corpse is less schizophrenic than the self. The dead body can only be in one place at one time." In the case of members of a diaspora community, therefore, the time of dying is a time for decisions, a time when one has to ask oneself again where one belongs (Balkan 2015, 132). This is why the act of burial – especially that of choosing the burial place – is a powerful means of asserting belonging in migratory settings. On the one hand, when a body is repatriated to the country of origin, it helps the descendants maintain ties to the country because the grave gives them a reason to visit regularly. Repatriation is therefore an important tool for transmitting historical memory or maintaining communal continuity (Balkan 2023). Additionally, if one understands the migratory process as cyclical, repatriation offers some sort of resolution (Ahmed Sara et al. 2004). On the other hand, when a body is consigned to the ground of the new homeland, it is a home-making practice *par excellence* (Balkan 2015, 123) by which the deceased person or their family shows that affiliation to the new homeland has overtaken affiliation to the old homeland. Moreover, once a member of a diaspora community has been buried in the new homeland, their descendants will naturally do the same. As Ho (2006, 3) aptly put it: "While graves are endpoints for migrants, they are beginnings for their descendants, marking the truth of their presence in a land."

In the case of people of Ethiopian origin in the US, therefore, the fact that most of them are buried in US graveyards is an important sign that they finally made the US their home. The presence of Ethiopians in the US is now marked across time, from the ancestors buried in US cemeteries to their present-day cultural presence, such as through the "Little Ethiopia" neighbourhood.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that burials are the most ritualized life-cycle events of Ethiopians in Ethiopia and its diaspora, and are essential for the creation of social networks. In addition to the high cost of hosting funeral services, Ethiopians in the US face considerable expenses for services and cemetery spaces. In order to meet these high expenses and organise a culturally appropriate ceremony or repatriation to Ethiopia at the same time, insurance associations modelled on the Ethiopian *iddir* have been formed in Southern California in recent years.

These highly-formalized associations profit from the infrastructure people of Ethiopian origin have built up over recent decades, like the “Little Ethiopia” ethnic enclave and Ethiopian churches. The *iddir* in Southern California help the Ethiopian community in many ways to make that part of the world a new home for them. Participating in an *iddir* association creates a present and future, and roots people in the here and now (Obeid 2013, 369), while extrapolating from there and then. Involvement in an *iddir* group is a purposeful activity that requires a long-term commitment and creates bonds that in turn root people in particular places and therefore help them make new homes away from their homeland.

I have attempted to show that burials, and especially burial places, which the *iddir* facilitate and finance, are also a tool for connecting the past with the present. *Iddir* associations organize, but do not influence, the very personal decision of bereaved families about which country the deceased is to be buried in. While this decision may seem very personal at first, it is also an important indication of the home-making and marking of fellow members of the diaspora community. Burial places are markers across time and space (Balkan 2023) that connect the past with the future. As Balkan fittingly writes, “the dead anchor the living” through burial sites (Balkan 2023, 198). The fact that most members of the community are buried in the US, and even have their own burial plots, shows that Ethiopians are finally in the US to stay. The decision to be buried in the US can be understood in the sense of coming to terms with the decades-long process of settlement. By burying deceased members in the US, the Ethiopian community is making itself a permanent home for the future and does not see its future solely in a return to their homeland, thereby breaking up the cyclical notion of migration.

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Home-Making as a Meso Level Process: Jewish Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel (2005–2023)

Is home a physical place or a symbolic space? A fixed location or an imagined relation? Closed or open? Stable or ever-changing? In the origin or destination country? In a world increasingly characterized by globalization, mobility and migration challenge us to consider the meaning of 'home' and the process of home-making that moves beyond such binaries. More and more studies on migration have begun introducing transnational theory, emphasizing the complex ways in which migrants negotiate among such polarized conceptions. The theory provides a structure for exploring home-making as a process influenced by both the macro and the micro, one that occurs primarily at the meso level and is characterized by the dynamic interplay between macro and micro.

Drawing on field work in Israel and transit camps, this article focuses on the ways in which Ethiopian migrants have created homes in Israel. The findings reveal that the concepts of home and home-making are the outcomes of a transnational process, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the ways individuals navigate and negotiate their sense of home across national boundaries. Further, by focusing on meso level processes, it provides insights into the implications for human security, well-being and social cohesion in transnational contexts.

Keywords: transnationalism, meso level, home-making, community spheres, human security, translocality

Introduction

As a global phenomenon, transnational migration has given rise to diverse policy considerations and social implications regarding the stages preceding, during, and following the migration process to a different nation. This study, which was conducted between 2020 and 2023, analyses the experiences shared

by Ethiopian migrants¹ to Israel, and builds on an extended ethnographic study (2005–12) that spanned Ethiopian villages, migrant camps, and arrival points in Israel. This publication focuses on the process of home-making in the destination country. I shine a spotlight on one dimension of the migration experience and ask how migrants make a home and sense of belonging in their destination country.

This study draws extensively on transnational theory, which seeks to ascertain the dynamic social, economic, and political processes that unfold across national borders. Transnational migration research, whether focused on migrant networks, families, diaspora communities, or organizations such as hometown associations, seeks to understand relationships that exist at a distance: the work that goes into creating or maintaining them; the meaning relationships take on in different contexts; and the flows and patterns of information, money, services, and care that are exchanged through them. This body of literature is based on the idea that social actors – individuals, families and organizations – can maintain meaningful ties and relationships across national boundaries sustained by communication technologies, travel, and financial remittances (Khagram & Levitt 2008; Mazzucato & Schans 2011).

These relationships occur, the theory argues, on three levels. First, at a macro level, transnational dynamics are shaped by global, political, economic, and structural forces, including multinational corporations, international organizations, and global financial systems. These macro-level factors influence the distribution of resources, economic inequalities, and power dynamics between states, impacting the overall landscape of transnational relations, and often creating the context in which migration occurs (Faist 2000; Khagram & Levitt 2008; Vertovec 2019). The micro level refers to the individual level of analysis within transnational dynamics, focusing on the experiences, identities, and social interactions of individuals across national borders. It examines how factors such as migration, transnational networks, and hybrid identities shape individuals' sense of belonging, cultural adaptation, and overall well-being in transnational contexts (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007).

Finally – and importantly for our purposes – the third level, the meso analytical level of analysis, refers to the intermediate level of analysis within transnational dynamics. It focuses on regional and subnational actors such as non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, and transnational social movements that contribute to shaping transnational relations, addressing human security concerns, and supporting collective action beyond state boundaries (Faist 2010; Portes & Sensenbrenner 1993).

¹ The Hebrew word for immigration is *hagira*. *Aliyah* (literally, ascension) is a word used specifically for Jewish immigration to Israel. This study uses the word immigration throughout, even in reference to *aliyah*.

In the theoretical background section, I consider several concepts that emerge from the transnational perspective, including the impact of globalization – and its concomitant mobility, migration, and ‘translocality’ – on a social life that is increasingly shaped by the virtual and remote, as opposed to the real and proximate. I explore the implications of this shift for the concept of ‘big place’ and ‘little place’ and, by extension, a non-binary concept of ‘home,’ particularly mobile geographies of home. My enquiries form the basis of an exploration of how migrants create a home and a sense of belonging in their destination country. I ask how concepts of big and small space are reflected in the process of making a home, and how investigating that process at a meso level – especially as it is reflected in the role of community – contributes to our understanding.

The methods section describes the ethnographic approach taken in the study and the Zera Beta Israel (ZBI)² community within which the research was carried out. The findings focus on what can be learned about home-making from interviews at, and observations of, two meso level community events, a funeral and a wedding. As the findings describe, the meso level is essential to the process of home-making. In the case of migrants from Ethiopia in Israel, I show that the experience of home-making creates bridges between the years-long wait for permission to immigrate, the influence of macro forces on the immigration process (Talmi-Cohn 2022), and the changes that occur at the micro, or individual, level during the process. As such, this study depicts home-making as a particularly powerful, non-linear process that takes place at the meso level, during which the inclusion and integration of the physical and cultural spaces occurs and is legitimized, mainly in community spaces. In the discussion and conclusion sections, I consider how the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways individuals navigate and negotiate their sense of home across national boundaries.

Theoretical Background

Making Place: ‘Big Place’ and ‘Small Place’

Transnational theory enables us to move beyond binaries when we attempt to understand the migration process. Where anthropological studies typically focus on either the origin or the destination country, or on either the macro or micro level forces influencing the migration process, transnational theory provides a structure for considering both levels and the dynamic interplay between them (Brettell 2003; Levitt 2012; Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec 2003; Talmi-Cohn 2018).

² The Zera Beta Israel, also known as Falash Mura, is a community with Jewish roots that converted to Christianity in the 19th century but still asserts its Jewish heritage.

One useful implication of a transnational approach is that it encourages a definition of ‘place’ that is demarcated by both internal and external boundaries. One moves beyond a physical notion of place, feeling that we are not randomly placed in space but have a unique and significant part within it. In this article, I argue that ‘home’ is a concept of a place ‘that is,’ which not only indicates a physical place but also contains narrative, essential meanings expressed in habits and a sense of belonging, as well as the site of identity, belonging, and memory (Appadurai 1996; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). This is a definition of home in more of an anthropological sense than a geographic one.

In the process of migration, place assumes aspects that can be considered from two points of view. The ‘small place’ describes a day-to-day existence in which individuals and families create, among other things, a sense of meaning and belonging. The ‘small place’ is reflected in everyday practices and the physical spaces in which they are found; it is experienced by the senses – in the languages heard and, in the smell, and visual characteristics of a neighbourhood. Alongside ‘small place’ sits a concept of ‘big place’ that is expressed not as something physical or tangible, but as an idea. In the Israeli context, ‘big place’ can be found in its mythical foundations and ideology and can encompass religious views and the idealization of place, the dream of a homecoming to Jerusalem, Israel, or Zion (Gurewitz 2007; Sharaby 2022; Talmi-Cohn 2018; 2020).

Home and Migration: Transnational Belongings and Mobilities

One of the expressions of place is ‘home,’ where the needs of life are met, where meaning is crystallized and culture is created. Scholarly discussions of the concept of home have long been structured as a series of binaries. Is home a physical place or a symbolic space? A fixed location or an imagined relation? Closed or open? Stable or ever-changing? Here, too, transnational perspectives are rich with viewpoints that broaden our understanding of the complex process of migration.

As early as 1992, Glick-Schiller and her colleagues defined transnationalism as “the processes by which migrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement,” pointing out that “transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations [...] that span borders [...] [and] take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously” (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992, 1–2). In a more recent study, Çağlar & Glick-Schiller (2018) examined the concept of multiple homes in the context of transnational migration, highlighting how migrants maintain attachments to both their home country and the host society. This perspective challenges traditional notions of home as a singular and fixed place.

The concept of home has significant anthropological and sociocultural implications, especially in the context of immigration and displacement. Increasingly – and, I would argue, fortunately – a growing number of studies on migration have begun to introduce transnational theory, challenging these dichotomous framings and emphasizing instead the complex ways in which migrants negotiate *among* such polarized conceptions (Andits 2015; Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport 2002; Markowitz & Stefansson 2004).

The importance of ‘multiple homes’ has only grown over time. Since the early 1990s, globalisation theorists have emphasized that in a world characterised by mobility and migration, social life is increasingly shaped by the virtual and remote, as opposed to the real and proximate. Identities are therefore seen as transient, mobile, and diasporic (Savage et al. 2005). In his manifesto entitled ‘Sociology of Mobilities,’ Urry (2000) extended this dimension of globalisation, arguing that contemporary forms of dwelling and belonging “almost always involve diverse forms of mobility.” Mobilities research focuses not only on the corporeal travel of people and the physical movement of objects, but also on imaginative, virtual, and communicative travel, enabling and coercing (some) people to live more “mobile lives” (Elliott & Urry 2010; Sheller 2011).

This research has challenged the way in which ‘home’ is imagined as territorially pre-defined and fixed, instead offering a conceptualization of home as mobile, flexible, and ‘in-becoming’ (Nowicka 2007). This aspect has been emphasised in studies that have examined the meanings migrants attach to home in different geographical locations, highlighting the deterritorialization of belonging and attachments (Appadurai 1996).

At the same time, the desire to associate home with particular meanings by attaching it to an immediate locale is still apparent, even for highly mobile transnational migrants. Both Butcher (2010) and Ralph & Staeheli (2011) make the point that there has been a tendency to overemphasize the shifting and mobile meanings of home while underplaying migrants’ struggles in, and attachments to, their current home.

Citing Jansen & Löfving (2011, 15) in their Introduction to this special issue, Glück and Thubauville note that: “Home is made and remade on an everyday basis through strategies of cultural continuity [...] as ways of overcoming alienation as well as social disintegration.” They also point out that social activity and social practice influence the ways people create home (see Turton 2005, 275; see also Obeid 2013, 368 et seq.), reflecting a sense of home that embodies a sense of both physical and psychic security, a place in which people understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of others (Hage 1997, 102 et seq.; Jansen 2008, 56). In an overarching sense, home is positioned between nostalgia for the past and hope for the future (Hage 1997; Jansen 2017).

The current research also relates to the work of Robbins (2013; 2018) on the study of the ‘good’ in seeking to show how the creation of community space through events produces and strengthens the feeling of family home. Communal events such as weddings or even burials in Israel are occasions that contribute to constructing the realization of the ‘good’ as a genuine possibility. At times, they can bolster motivation in the face of an uncertain future, adding hope and fulfilment to the immigration process.

The literature supports the importance of ‘home’ at multiple levels to those experiencing migration and immigration. We even know that certain communal events can produce and strengthen the feeling of family home. For example, Robbins (2013; 2018) on the study of the ‘good’ shows how the creation of community space in events like weddings or even funerals contributes to a sense of home. We know less, however, about the characteristics of this process of home-building. The key question which is the focus of this chapter remains: “... how [do] migrants build homes and identities through complex relationships that are plural, extensible, *but nevertheless localised*” (Ralph & Staeheli 2011, 522)? To explore this question, it builds on Brickell and Datta (2011), who apply the concept of ‘translocality’ to enhance our understanding of the interconnections between mobility *and* locality, routes *and* roots, as well as transnational *and* local attachments (Clifford 1997; Ehrkamp 2005; Gustafson 2009).

Methods

This article is a continuation of an ethnographic study of a group of Ethiopian Jews known as the Zera Beta Israel (ZBI), also called Falash Mura,³ conducted between 2005 and 2012. In contrast to most immigration researchers, I learned Amharic prior to and while travelling along with the ZBI for seven years, conducting fieldwork, participant observations, and in-depth, open-ended interviews with more than a hundred community members as they moved along each of their journey’s stations, from their villages of origin in northern Ethiopia to transit camps awaiting immigration to Israel, to absorption centres in Israel, and finally to their permanent homes in Israel. My study therefore enabled an exploration of what was often a 15-year migration process from an anthropological point of view – an opportunity to understand the migration journey not only from the perspective of the destination country but also through the various stages of that journey.

Building on the 2005–2012 study, this article focuses on the ways in which ZBI migrants have created homes in Israel. It draws on fieldwork in Israel and in transit camps in Gondar and Addis Ababa, as well as participant observation

³ They are also known as Falash Mura, but in this article I will use the name Zera Beta Israel and the initials ZBI (Talmi-Cohn 2020).

and in-depth, open-ended interviews between 2020 and 2023. As an Israeli, a woman, and a Jewish anthropologist, I am aware that my social and cultural position may have influenced the research, so I maintained transparency throughout the study to mitigate potential biases. The participants included 20 people aged from 20 to 60 who arrived in Israel between two and 20 years ago. Fieldwork was carried out both in Israel and in Gondar in Ethiopia between 2020 and 2023, and included participation in weddings, funerals, parties, and religious holidays.

The research method relied on Glaser & Strauss's (2017) grounded theory methodology, in which questions are not predetermined. Instead, they reflect the main issues that emerged while conducting the study and following the fieldwork, as I experienced day-to-day life social encounters, conversations, community celebrations, religious practices, and events (Kleinman 1997; Seeman 2004). Using this approach, this research focuses on the issue of home-making and emphasizes 'home' as it bridges private and community spaces, reflecting the importance of the meso level in transnational theory. In keeping with the qualitative interpretive approach, the subjects' reality is viewed as a whole rather than in isolated segments, with the aim of uncovering the collective dynamics of construction and sharing of meaning.

The open-ended interviews conducted for this research took place in either Hebrew or Amharic, with the goal of helping people express their perceptions, thoughts, and hidden attitudes. Construction of the ethnographic interview guidelines (Spradley 1979) was based on migration, home-making, daily life after the migration process, community events, parties and holidays, and feeling of belonging. The interviewees, who provided their consent, were told that their identities would be protected, that there were no wrong answers, and that they could skip questions. For all the interviews, patterns, themes, and categories were identified using narrative analysis (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2011; Salmon & Riessman 2008).

Zera Beta Israel (ZBI)

Ethiopian Jews have preserved their religious identity for many generations in isolation from the rest of the Jewish world (Corinaldi 2001; Waldman 1995). The community comprises two main groups: Beta Israel and Zera Beta Israel (ZBI). The Beta Israel community is made up of Jews who have maintained their Jewishness throughout their lives, adhering to a religious Jewish lifestyle based on the 'halachic' (Jewish law) tradition of Ethiopian Jews (Shalom 2016). The first migrants from this group arrived in Israel in the 1950s; most of the rest arrived in two large-scale operations: Operation Moses (1984–85) and Operation Solomon (1991).

The ZBI – the population that is the focus of this study – has been defined by Israel's Supreme Court as "being of ethnic Jewish origin (Beta Israel)

who converted to Christianity because of specific circumstances of time, place and environment. At the same time, they preserved their uniqueness, partly because of the distinctions and aversions of their non-Jewish neighbours. Now they seek to return to their Judaism and to immigrate to Israel” (Israel Supreme Court, 3317/93).

Their conversion to Christianity is attributed to their responses to man-made and natural disasters at the end of the 19th century. During this time – which is known as *kapo-ken*, or the ‘bad time’ – the community experienced years of drought, hunger, and plague. Many villages were destroyed in the war between the Ethiopians and Dervish invaders from Sudan. Furthermore, during the period of Emperor Yohannes, aided by European Christian missionaries, conversion to Christianity was made obligatory. Consequently, some Beta Israel converted to Christianity mainly as a means of survival (Corinaldi 2001; Waldman 1995).

Today, members of the Zera Beta Israel contend that the non-Jewish lifestyle adopted by their forebears was the result of their being offspring of *anusim*-converts whose parents or grandparents had been coerced into conversion. They also argue that their separation from Ethiopian Judaism was never absolute; rather, the ZBI retained their original social frameworks and maintained ties with Beta Israel families. This view is confirmed by a variety of studies (see, for example, Cohen 2011; Salamon 1993; Seeman 2009; Shabtai 2006; Talmi-Cohn 2018) that show that while the ZBI left the Jewish religion, their conversion to Christianity was far from complete, suspending them and their descendants between Ethiopian Jews and Christians, and not fully assimilated into or accepted by either group.

The arrival of the ZBI in Israel began around 1993 and continues sporadically today. They began arriving at transit camps in around 1991, where they started a process of returning to Judaism before departing to immigrant absorption centres in Israel, where they underwent a conversion process – in accordance with state-sanctioned rabbinic Judaism’s interpretation of Jewish law – before residing in Israel permanently (Talmi-Cohn 2022).

At the end of 2021, of the approximately 165,000 Israelis of Ethiopian origin in Israel, some 91,000 were born in Ethiopia. Of these, 58,069 have immigrated since 1992, 40,380 in 2001–2021 alone, most of whom belong to the ZBI community. About two-thirds of the entire Israeli population of Ethiopian origin live in two main areas of the country – the centre (37%) and the south (26%) (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics 2022).

Two Events

This section begins with field notes from two community events – a funeral and a wedding – that will serve as case studies. The nature of these events, together with the thoughts shared by community members in interviews,

support the proposition that they take place at the meso level and form the basis for the dynamic process of home-making among members of the ZBI community in Israel. After sharing my field notes, I describe the importance of these events for home-making, supported by interviews with members of the community.

The Funeral

A funeral is an unbearably difficult day, one that no one wants to come. In the morning, I arrive at the family home while everyone slowly gathers. The young people help with everything related to the state burial requirements, while others take care of printing and framing photos of the deceased. The message about the deceased has been passed among the neighbours and on WhatsApp groups of family and friends. As the time of the funeral approaches, hundreds of people arrive at the cemetery from all over. The ceremony itself is carried out in accordance with Jewish halachic law and includes the tearing of the shirts of the immediate family members – a sign of mourning in rabbinic Judaism – and a recitation of the Hebrew memorial prayer.

Afterwards, everyone organizes rides with other attendees and we drive from the cemetery to a club designed for events and parties for Israelis of Ethiopian origin. The older people lament aloud. During the course of the day, hundreds of people arrive from all over the country. The mourners, brothers, sisters, and children carry a black cover (*kaba*) on their shoulders. The deceased's daughter puts her late father's pants on her shoulders backwards, with the legs tied. The mourners sit side-by-side. Every few minutes a new group enters – usually the oldest member first. As they pass the mourners, each person touches the shoulder symbolising participation in their sorrow.

On some occasions, especially when a respected elderly man or woman arrives, everyone stands in a circle, showing the picture of the deceased and mourning together. They tell of their life in Ethiopia and Israel, about the shared memories and the good things he did. Afterwards, one of those present asks everyone to sit down and they wait for a few minutes until more people arrive. And so it goes throughout the day.

At the same time, there are other people in the club who sit and share the family's grief. A few men pass through the visitors collecting money to help the family pay for the burial and expenses of sitting *shiva* (seven days of mourning). Each guest gives as much as they are moved to give and in accordance with their ability. One writes down the name of the donor and collects the money. At the same time, two others pass by and distribute *injera* (an Ethiopian food).

This day ends in the evening, after which the family continues to sit *shiva* for seven days in the home of the deceased or another family member, a Jewish custom derived from Biblical sources. On the seventh day, the day of the ascent to the grave, the customs are different. On this day, which is called the 'Seven

Kans' ('Seven Days'), hundreds of people come to support the family and share in the family's grief at various times throughout the day, including close and distant relatives, neighbours, and numerous acquaintances.

The younger adults run between work and the large gathering, while the older adults, who have more time, stay longer. The discourse, the conduct, the food, the crying, the sorrow, and the emotion all unfold in the language and culture of Amhara. During the day, the deceased's son tells me that he and his brother will move one day to sit *shiva* in another city so that "it's easier for people to come." He continues, "You know how it is with us. For many funerals, people can't stop working, and there are also elderly people who find it difficult to come, so I prefer that we move to a city for a day [to] help them" (Field diary 2023).

It is important to note that even for relatives who have passed away in Ethiopia, there is a day or several days in which family members in Israel sit in mourning along with first-degree relatives.

The Wedding

What joy! The exciting day is coming! Nitsenat is getting married! I know her from Gondar, from when she was a little girl. Since then, she has immigrated and successfully completed high school and national service and will soon graduate with a bachelor's degree. The wedding has been anticipated for a long time and the whole family is excited. On Tuesday, a group of mostly relatives comes for the pre-wedding *henna* event. Within the club, there is a tent decorated in Ethiopian style, with an *injera mesob* (a special basket in which *injera* is placed and served), sticks in the colours of the Ethiopian flag, and music in Amharic.

The couple enter the hall through an entrance decorated with *kavas* (robes and decorations) and lace umbrellas. After the couple has been blessed by the adults, they give each other *injera* and *tej* (Ethiopian honey wine). Applying *henna* (a plant-based dye) on the hands and more is part of the celebration. The family event is relatively intimate – so exciting, full of joy, music, and love. The groomsmen and bridesmaids accompany the bride and groom through the blessings, the *henna* application, the music, and the food. Much of it is very similar to the tradition in Ethiopia (*enshoshila*), but of course, it is not exactly the same.

Thursday is the big day of the official wedding. The morning starts in the bridal salon for make-up, hair styling, dressing, and so on. The event itself is attended by hundreds of relatives, neighbours, and friends from work, school and everywhere else in a hall that hosts events for the entire Israeli population (not just for Israelis of Ethiopian descent), and so the food is characteristic of

Israel (and not specifically of Ethiopia).⁴ The integration of language, music, culture, and Jewish traditions from the Amhara region with the religious ceremony itself, including the marriage canopy, takes place in accordance with the halachic Judaism associated with state religious practices in Israel, and in this case, the ceremony is conducted by a rabbi who does not speak Amharic.

During the rest of the evening following the ceremony, the celebration is accompanied by dances (*askata*) in Amharic, sometimes also in Tigrinya. In the middle of the event, there is wedding music in Hebrew, followed again by Amharic songs. Nitsenat and her husband make the first of four entrances into the wedding hall – each time accompanied by four or five groomsmen – and greet their guests. For their second entrance, they wear north Ethiopian clothes. Then they enter for a slow dance with fireworks and balloons. Finally, for the fourth entrance, the couple wear different clothes and share champagne. There is joyful music and dancing throughout, and guests attach banknotes to the foreheads of the bride and groom and their nuclear family. Some people are seeing one another for the first time in a long time; everyone disconnects from everyday life and enters this special space.

On the Friday and Saturday nights following the wedding, the family participates in an event at the community club. They have been preparing it for many months, making *chow*, the *tala* and *injera* for the event and slaughtering a cow a few days before. Neighbours and other relatives arrive and enjoy more dancing and food, *injera* and meat. Nitsenat and her husband move between the club of the groom's and the bride's parents – which can be in a separate area of the hall or the neighbourhood. The relatives' clothes and some of the bride and groom's outfits are imported from Ethiopia. The club, the music, the company, the community, the food, and the meetings create a home-like, familiar, and accessible space (Field diary 2021).

What these Events Reveal about Home-Making

Both of these community gatherings depict not only specific events but also structures that are constant in funerals and weddings among most Ethiopian migrants to Israel in recent years. Below are descriptions of the ways that each engages with home-making, supported by interviews with community members.

Creation of a Space that Combines the Big and the Small Place

The 'big place' that existed mostly in people's imaginations before and during the process of immigrating to Israel was the return to Zion and Judaism,

⁴ Israel is a very diverse society, and every society has its own way of celebrating. The term Israel refers to the secular and religious society and the widely standard norms.

while the ‘small place’ included expectations and thoughts about meeting Israeli relatives, as well as changes in the standard of living and access to technology that immigration may bring. After immigration, the ‘big place’ is supplemented by a longing for Ethiopia – the mother of Africa – and for the culture and conduct there and the sense of control, power, and strength (especially for the adults) associated with memories of life there. Alongside this, the ‘small place’ in Israel includes day-to-day experiences of busy schedules, work, studies, and more.

The funeral and wedding described above combine both elements – the dream of the ‘big place’ that preceded immigration, as reflected in the religious elements of these events, which conformed to Jewish halachic law. On the other hand, much of the ‘small place’ nature of these events – the gatherings of family, friends, and neighbours – is similar to the experience in Ethiopia. In other words, weddings and funerals are both examples of the dynamic nature that is characteristic of the meso level and that reveals important elements of the process of home-making. As Senait relates:

You know how it is, similar and different. It’s very important for parents that the whole family can attend, for each event, that they record who gave what, that there should be a video, that there is a rabbi, and also that the adults bless, and of course the music. So, if there is an event like a wedding or bar mitzvah, there is a lot here in Israel that is similar to what happens in Ethiopia. But it’s always important here to have a rabbi, to have a blessing [...]. I know that the adults are happy [with this]. I always see how happy they are at weddings. They wait for [weddings] for a long time. It’s hard because there [are] many events, but in the end, they are always happy, everyone meets with everyone. (Senait 2022)

Senait’s description of the wedding demonstrates how there are practices of the ‘small place’ that continue between Ethiopia and Israel alongside the dream of the ‘big place,’ Judaism and the family. There is an opportunity to express this at family events.

In an interview with Toro, below, Senait describes similar experiences, but adds an important aspect: despite everything, the immigration process is not over, the dream of the ‘small place’ has come true, and the dream of the ‘big place’ has partly come true (as there is family in Ethiopia that did not immigrate). But an event like a wedding creates a moment of contentment, joy, and connections with the extended family in Israel.

Do you know how much the parents dreamed of this moment? All their lives they dreamed that we would be in Israel, and they would marry [off] their children. Admittedly, the event is not perfect because there is another family in Ethiopia that did not immigrate, the mother’s brother and father’s sisters, but my parents’ children are here, and they are very happy. (Toro 2020)

Yosef emphasizes the difficulty posed by funerals in the context of the 'small place.' There is a tension between the desire to be present, as accepted in the community, and the requirements of day-to-day life after immigration.

A funeral in Israel is not like in Ethiopia [...]. There are similar things and there are differences. For example, in Israel, they tear clothes at a funeral, [but] in Ethiopia, this would never happen in life. In Ethiopia, it takes a few days to visit someone, [but] in Israel, there is pressure from work and the children (who will take care of them?), so we go for a short time. (Yosef 2021)

The space in which community events are marked is a relatively safe space to be themselves and celebrate their culture without the supervision of the dominant culture, which aims for 'integration.' Here 'Israeliness' is simply 'to be who we are, what we dreamed and what we brought' (Dani 2022). The interplay between the big and the small place is evident in these events, reflecting the migrants' complex negotiation of their Ethiopian heritage and their new lives in Israel.

Combining Special Communal Times with a Physical Space

Family events are mostly held in spaces that are unique to the community, such as a club or a park (Sportech). They are also held for a longer period of time than is typical in Israel. Asher describes how his mother and her neighbours have been preparing for the event for three months, and how they work together to prepare the food and the spices. This shows that the event space is not just a physical space, but also a social space where the community comes together to celebrate and build relationships that transcend the event itself:

My mother and her neighbour have been preparing the spices for the chow for three months, as it has to sit a long time, and also for the tala. A few days before the event, they prepare the injera and the men prepare the meat. They work, talk and prepare [together]. Many times, they are busy with it because you also help the neighbours with their events – and then there's the event itself. So they have a lot to deal with. For us young people it's not always easy to come to events, [with] work, raising children and our studies. Many times, you have to make a choice and it's stressful because Mom always says it's important that you come and I know I can't always [...]. (Asher 2022)

Shira points out that the event, a wedding, takes a few days and she is fine with that, but it cannot be like that for everybody:

When I was a bridesmaid, it was not one day; from Tuesday I took time off from work and was with the bride and groom until Saturday night. This is the reason I can't be a bridesmaid for all my friends – only very close family like my sister or very, very good friends. It is blessed but it can be a problem with work. (Shira 2022)

Alafa turns from the time of communal events and adds more detail about the management of the event space and how the community takes ownership of it:

There is someone who is in charge of the club.⁵ Sometimes you have to book a place for a wedding a year in advance because everything is closed. They try to make shifts which will be both Friday and Saturday [...]. Because there are many events, the club also has several people who are responsible for the key, for the cleaning, for all the management of the place. It's a place that the municipality brought to the community, and we do a lot there [...] it's just our [space]. (Alafa 2022)

The event space is a meso space, in that the community is responsible for it, creates it, and preserves it in ways that are characteristic of both Ethiopian and Israeli practices. Beyond the time-limited nature of the many events marked in this unique space, preparations are often organized many months before and after the event itself. These include family and communal activities such as preparing food, inviting people, documenting the gifts, watching video footage of the event, and attending other events for the guests who were there, all alongside everyday life.

The Power of the Community

Most of the family events are planned and managed by community members without the involvement of the state, or external organizations or people. Over the years, the services they hire on their own, such as photographers, DJs, and so on, are enough, and many are from the community itself. Turu describes the challenges of managing all the community events, but also the importance of family and community:

It's hard to [manage all of the community events] to combine all the things. You have to make a lot of choices between life and family. Think about it, I have seven more brothers, each one has a wedding, a marriage, bar mitzvah [a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony], and more uncles [...]. But now that I'm sitting and talking to you, I understand how great it is. This is how I see the family. This is how we keep up to date and keep in touch. And family [gives] a lot of strength. (Turu 2021)

⁵ The club is a physical place that includes two to three large rooms, a yard, a storage room, a kitchen, refrigerators, and more, and is usually located close to residential areas with a large population of Israelis of Ethiopian origin. It is provided by the local authority, but is owned and maintained by members of the Ethiopian community and is intended primarily for Ethiopian community events.

Adana describes how the community organizes and manages events, and how this gives them a sense of power and resilience:

Everything is always very organized. [...] The adults always know what's going on, who is responsible for the slaughter, who is responsible for the club, who brings drinks, who is responsible for cooking, who is responsible for collecting the money, counting the money, recording the money in notebooks. For everything, there is always someone who is responsible, and everyone always helps all the time [...]. It's always trusted people from the family; there are the elders they bless, and there are those who are responsible for the order and organization. Also with the young people, let's say I got married, so I [will need] drivers, and groomsmen, and those who are responsible for counting the money, and those who are responsible for seating in the hall. Everyone helps all the time, the close family and friends [...]. Things seem to happen without many words. Yes, sometimes they get angry and remember who did and who didn't [do what] at which event, but many times [they] return, helping each other [...]. (Adana 2022)

Together, these quotes show how community events are a way for people to connect with their roots and their culture of origin, and how the community events are a way for people to build relationships and support each other. These spaces preserve the power of the community. They are created, managed, and supervised by the community in ways that foster respect, pride, and joy, which above all create resilience.

Creating a Feeling of Home

In this sense, the home made here is a place where everything is clear and there is room for emotions to be expressed – whether sorrow or joy, or an emotion of liberation. As Yezbalam describes it, funerals are a place where people can express even difficult emotions:

My mother goes to funerals many times to cry; that's what I feel. She cries because of her sorrow because of things that happened to us, but it's easiest for her to cry with everyone [else]. That's how it is with adults. At home you don't cry. At a funeral, it's a permissible place to cry. It's fine. I know that during difficult times for her, she often goes to everyone's funerals, even if it's in a different city. (From a conversation with Yezbalam, 2021)

Similarly, Soblo describes weddings as a place where people can connect with their family and friends and feel a sense of belonging:

Weddings are how I meet everyone, people in Israel that I don't have time to see at all. Family for example – sometimes we talk on WhatsApp [but when] there's a wedding, I see everyone, and [feel] happy and [enjoy the] dancing. It's fun, it gives me a good feeling, a feeling that I can be the way I am. At first when I came up to Israel, I was young and I wanted to be like everyone else, so I stayed away

from weddings. But today I understand how important and good it is. It makes me happy, it frees me, to dance, like in the old days in Ethiopia with friends and family. (Soblo 2022)

Senait expands on Soblo's view, describing weddings as a time for people to remember their loved ones, celebrate their lives, and feel at home, surrounded by their culture and community:

After the wedding, the parents watch the movies over and over again. It's the movie that plays the most at home and it makes them happy. They see the family and remember a lot of things. (Senait 2022)

Adana echoes this:

Home is a feeling, a thought. I can be anywhere in the world, I don't care where, and I will get along. But to say "home," [that's where] I have a family and I share everyone's religion, so it's easy, it's comfortable, but the most fun is at the events. That's where you come home, [with the] music, food, family, and friends. (Adane 2022)

In each case, the respondents' remarks imply a concept of 'home' that is fluid and can be experienced in different ways. However, they also suggest that there are common elements that contribute to the feeling of home for the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel. These include shared cultural practices, a sense of belonging, and the support of community members. As these interviews suggest, the concept of 'home' comes alive in shared communal spaces, where the cultural practices of Ethiopia and Israel intermingle freely. In addition, in such space, community members experience the feeling of home without the supervision of the majority culture.

Discussion

This article explores the concept of home and home-making among Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. It draws on concepts expressed in transnationalism that have gained significant traction in recent years, as more and more individuals navigate multiple cultural identities and establish connections beyond their nation of origin. The literature argues that a variety of macro, micro and meso forces influence the migration process. Here, the focus is specifically on the process of home-making in the destination country – a process that occurs at the meso level. Fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews related to two communal events marked by members of the Zera Beta Israel community in Israel demonstrate that the community sphere plays a crucial role in shaping such home-making.

The findings from this study demonstrate the multiple ways in which communal spaces provide a framework within which individuals create a

sense of home. These spaces and the events held in them combine 'big place' (the aspiration to return to Zion and Judaism) and 'small place' (day-to-day experiences in Israel). In addition, the location of community events is often unique to the community, they go on for longer than comparable Israeli events (admittedly, however, this causes some stress among younger community members, who have to navigate Israeli workplace requirements and Ethiopian multi-day traditions).

Communal spaces enable a unique reunion of food, language, culture, dance, dress, and religious practices that departs only partially from what happens in Ethiopia, instead embraces an integration of some Israeli practices with what used to be. They suit new migrants from Ethiopia and facilitate the return to familiar, safe places that do not require mediation with or explanations from the prevailing Israeli culture. These places encourage the expression of emotions and feelings, thereby allowing for a self-evident social order and the public expression of a cultural sense.

It is in these communal spaces that those who are not from the community feel a sense of foreignness and require explanations. However, they represent a retreat from some of the most challenging aspects of integrating into broader Israeli society, which still struggles with racism and whose religious institutions have been slow to recognize the legitimacy of the Judaism developed in Ethiopia. In addition, many community members, especially adults, attach great value to preserving and using specific cultural elements that mark a continuation of their lives in their country of origin until today. Communal spaces offer an opportunity to observe and model, respecting elders, traditional greetings, community blessings, *injera*, and manners as they used to be practiced in Ethiopia. It is mainly manifested by the adults, but young people over the age of 20 come to understand this importance after they have been in Israel for a few years.

Not every community member experiences this sense of home, however – generational differences, seniority, and other parameters may result in some individuals feeling like outsiders – but the creation of these communal spaces makes the existence of transnational homes possible, and provides individuals with a sense of belonging and connection.

This research highlights the fact that for members of the community, this meso-level process, which I have shown is essential to the process of home-making, is cultivated and preserved in the communal sphere, providing an environment in which expressions of home can flourish without concerns about integration or questions of migration. They also serve as places within which fears about racism and questions about religious legitimacy do not exist. They provide an essential component for maintaining and preserving the concept of home, a space within which individuals can return to the feeling of home, generating anchors of partnership and human security.

Conclusions

This study of migrants from Ethiopia living in Israel shows that the experience of home-making creates bridges between the years-long wait for permission to immigrate, the influence of macro forces on their immigration process (Talmi-Cohn 2022), and the changes that occur at the micro, or individual, level during the process. It depicts home-making as a particularly powerful, non-linear process that takes place at the meso level, during which the inclusion and integration of physical and cultural spaces take place and are legitimized, mainly in community spaces. Community spheres play a crucial role in home-making in ways that result in what might be considered as transnational homes for Ethiopian migrants in Israel. Operating at the meso level, community spaces permit the interaction and integration of the multiple forces at play in migration, including a sense of comfort with the power dynamics related to the language, culture, traditions, and religious practices of the place of origin and the destination countries and recreate social and cultural hierarchies from everyday life experiences. The findings have implications for the study of transnationalism, and of home-making more broadly. They support the view that community spheres provide a space for individuals that helps create a sense of belonging and connection – a sense of home – across borders.

I argue that the meso-level process of home-making has implications for human security, well-being, and social cohesion in transnational contexts. Moreover, understanding how the process of creating a home impacts the lives of migrants and the communities of which they are a part can inform policies and practices aimed at fostering inclusive societies and promoting social integration.

To conclude, this study highlights the central role of community spaces in the home-making process among Ethiopian migrants in Israel. Future research could explore how the concept of home continues to evolve among the second and third generations of Ethiopian immigrants, examining changes in transnational elements and the impact of community and communal events on shaping their sense of belonging and cultural identity. This approach could provide deeper anthropological insights into the cultural processes and communal events that emerge at the intersection between nations and cultures, and enrich our understanding of transnational dynamics.

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Kim Glück

“When I’m with Them, I’m at Home”: Informal Savings Associations and the Process of Home-Making among Ethiopian Israelis and Ethiopian Migrants in Israel

Informal savings associations (which are known as *equb/qubye* in the Ethiopian context) are a global phenomenon and an important future-making practice. Especially in new contexts (following migration, for example), people resort to these informal associations, which fulfil economic, social, cultural, and political functions. While it is generally accepted that they are a future-oriented saving practice, the dreams, hopes, and wishes for the future associated with them are very individual.

This paper addresses the notion of home and future among Ethiopian-Israelis and Ethiopian and Eritrean migrant workers in Israel. It illustrates the fluctuations between yearning for a nostalgic past in Ethiopia and envisioning a new future home outside it. Activity and participation in informal savings associations such as *equb* form the characteristic unity of both groups, and also distinguish them from the rest of the Israeli population. However, the difference between both groups, which in turn affects future aspirations and notions of home, lies in the socio-political realm.

The paper discusses the various visions of the future, dreams, hopes, and wishes of these two groups with being involved in informal savings associations and the extent to which they contribute to people feeling at home.

Keywords: informal savings associations, home-making, future, good life, migration

Introduction

Ethiopian Israelis (self-designation Beta Israel: House of Israel)¹ have been arriving in Israel, their long-awaited religious homeland, since the 1980s and 1990s, and are an integral part of the multicultural Israeli society. For Beta Israel, planning for the future is determined by their somewhat complex position within Israeli society as a minority facing institutional and structural racism (Gidron 2020; Yerday 2019) and struggling for religious recognition of their Jewishness. Because they are protected by the Israeli welfare state (such as pensions), state mortgages or a house of their own, the urge to save money for an uncertain future does not seem too urgent (Kaplan 2010, 73). However, informal savings associations (*equb*) are also ubiquitous among the Beta Israel community.

Ethiopian and Eritrean² migrant workers and asylum-seekers³ are tolerated on a provisional basis, and Israel is mostly just a temporary stopover on the way to reaching a future home outside Israel. For Ethiopian and Eritrean migrant workers, belonging to an *equb* group is an important mechanism for maintaining and strengthening their connection to the diaspora community. Their plans for the future, as well as their everyday lives, are shaped by their precarious socio-political situation. Their visions of the future therefore refer to different time dimensions: on the one hand, to a foreseeable and plannable near-term future in Israel, with a focus on community building, and on the

¹ This refers to Israelis with an Ethiopian-Jewish migration background. I use their self-designation Beta Israel as well as the term 'Ethiopian Israelis.' One decisive factor when it comes to using this term as well as the self-designation is the socio-historical background: that is, whether a person belongs to the first immigrant generation that immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia as adult in the 1980s and 1990s, or to the second and third generations that were born and raised in Israel. The later generations refer to themselves as Israelis, while the former tend to use the self-designation Beta Israel. Some researchers omit the word Ethiopian altogether, and refer to Israelis from Ethiopian-Jewish migrant backgrounds as *New Israelis* – a term coined by Danny Admasu and brought up in a personal conversation in July 2023. A detailed discussion of external attributions is beyond the scope of this article, but see, for example, Kaplan (2005); Kaplan & Rosen (1994); Hamilton & Benti (2007). This article will cite an example of a member of the Falash Mura group. The case of the Falash Mura and their affiliation or demarcation with the Beta Israel community is discussed at length by several researchers such as Seeman (2009); Kaplan (2013); or Talmi-Cohn in this volume. ² The Ethiopian diaspora community in Israel is quite small. The shared cultural background and ethnic affiliation (Tigrayan) of Eritreans and Ethiopians (Tigrayan and Amhara) binds them together in Israel, and so *equb* groups in Israel often consist of Ethiopian and Eritrean asylum-seekers. ³ In this article, the terms migrant worker and asylum-seeker are used synonymously. For more information on the different classifications, see Willen (2019).

other to a distant, uncertain future that is not envisioned to be in Israel, with a focus on financial security to create a future home elsewhere that is created through informal savings associations.

The aim of this paper is to establish a link between dreams and hopes for a better future and the process of home-making, between arriving, integrating in new surroundings, making the best of one's situation, and actively shaping one's own future through activities in the present.⁴

Notions of Home and Practicing *Equb*

In my case studies, home can refer to the past – to Ethiopia as a place of home, a place of longing, but one that has been left⁵ because a better life is or was expected and envisioned outside Ethiopia. Home can refer to temporal dimensions, to the present and future. In the case of Ethiopian Israelis, it refers to life in Israel as a longed-for home, but one where they are a minority confronted with the challenges of multicultural Israeli society. Meanwhile, Ethiopian asylum-seekers who have migrated to Israel have to struggle with the hurdles of the Israeli migration regime (Willen 2019).

I argue that the *equb/qubye*⁶ activities of Ethiopian Israelis and Ethiopian migrant workers represent a form of feeling at home, in the sense that they activate and nourish the four key elements of 'home' developed by Hage (1997): security, familiarity, community, and a sense of possibility or hope (see the introduction to this volume). The extent to which these four factors are pronounced and their significance in the quest for feeling at home is highly individual (Jansen 2017). Each person's subjective experience and interpretation of these elements will vary based on their unique circumstances – in this case, for example, legal status (as an Israeli citizen or asylum-seeker), cultural and/or religious background (Jewish or non-Jewish) – and personal desires. It is through this lens of individuality that we must approach and understand the multifaceted nature of feeling at home and the diverse paths individuals take in their pursuit of it.

The works of Stefan Jansen on the processes of home-making clarify the various temporal and spatial dimensions of the notion of home and the processes of home-making (Jansen 2008; 2017). Jansen's work on the *displaced*,

⁴ My research took place within the framework of the DFG-funded project "On the saf(v)e Side: Informal Economic Associations and Future Aspirations in the Ethiopian Diaspora." ⁵ Reasons for emigration are for example political or religious persecution, or economic deprivation. ⁶ The term *qubye* is very common among Ethiopian Israelis. Most Ethiopian Jews are originally from the Ethiopian region of Amhara, and especially from the area around Gondar. The term *qubye* is derived from the Amharic dialect spoken in Gondar (Anbessa Teffera, 3 October 2021: Interview).

or as he calls them, *distimed* people affected by the 1990s war in Bosnia-Herzegovina emphasizes the temporal dimension, particularly the future-oriented aspect of home-making (Jansen 2008, 55 et seq.). The upheaval of the 1990s not only displaced these people from their pre-war homes, but also disturbed their connection to the past, present, and future – altering their familiar experiences of time itself, as Jansen points out (Jansen 2008, 55 et seq.) This approach can also be applied to the migration and refugee experiences of the groups discussed here. Starting in 1975, a significant number of Ethiopian Jews migrated from the northern regions of Ethiopia, mainly the Tigray and Amhara regions, to Israel. Their journey was an arduous one that involved an overland route through Sudan, with prolonged stays in refugee camps and an uncertain future in Israel (Kaplan 2010). This uprooted their sense of time and challenged their understanding of home. They aspired to an uncertain new home in Israel full of hopeful visions. A similar situation can be observed among Ethiopian and Eritrean asylum-seekers. Their original hoped-for migration destination is or was Europe. However, their journey is marked by numerous setbacks. They face rejection, being redirected to refugee camps, or even being sent back to Ethiopia.⁷ Despite these obstacles, they persevere and continue their journey until they eventually arrive in Israel, even though it was never envisioned as their destination or future home. In addition to the temporal dimension characterized by waiting, as discussed by Hage (2009), their migration experience also entails spatial disruptions. The unpredictability of their journey, the uncertainties of their destinations, and the constant shifting of their physical locations all contribute to a sense of spatial disruption. Their initial plans and expectations of reaching Europe are disrupted, leading to a reorientation of their migration trajectory toward Israel. This spatial disruption adds another layer of complexity to their migration experience, further challenging their notions of home and belonging, and the stability of their intended destinations.

Building on Hage's proposition that home is an ideal state that is sought after, worked towards, saved for, and hoped for, the exploration of home-making primarily involves examining the processes and activities that take place in the present but are driven by future visions (of home) (Jansen 2017). Focusing on the dynamic nature of home-making, which encompasses not only the present actions but also the aspirations and dreams for the future that shape these actions, highlights the significance of considering the future dimension in order to understand how individuals construct and envision their sense of home, and eventually a better life.

⁷ Most of the Eritrean asylum-seekers first find refuge in Ethiopia and start their journey to Europe or Israel from there.

The practice of *equb* among Ethiopian Israelis as well as Ethiopian and Eritrean migrant workers is guided by a desire to develop a sense of home, to arrive, to integrate, and to find their place within the social and spatial framework Israel. In this article, *equb* is conceptualised as a home-making practice that links the spatial dimension of home-making in Israel with the temporal dimension of a future-oriented saving practice. The research question is thus: How do the home-making practices of *equb*, as a form of constructing and conceptualizing home, influence, and how are they influenced by, the visions of home among Ethiopian Israelis and Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants in Israel? This research sheds light on the different and highly individualised notions of home and future, and explores how *equb* as a cultural practice inherited from Ethiopia influences the notion of home and interacts with the memories of the home left behind.

Methods

For my research, I spent three months in Israel in 2021 and 2022 to gather data on the practice of *equb* within the Ethiopian diaspora, including the Beta Israel community. My methodology involved participant observation, regular attendance at *equb* meetings, and conducting in-depth interviews. Having previously conducted research in Ethiopia, my basic knowledge of Amharic significantly facilitated rapid access to my interlocutors. My identity as a non-Israeli researcher was perceived positively. This can likely be attributed to the Ethiopian Jews' initial migration experiences, during which they often encountered researchers and employees from Israeli institutions who portrayed them as naive and dependent. A mistrust of researchers who do not belong to the Ethiopian Jewish community, especially white researchers, was expressed to me several times (Interview, Sharon Shalom, 9 September 2021). Although as a non-Israeli, I certainly earned their trust quickly, suspicious questions about my research interest and who would benefit from it, as well as statements like "a few years ago I would not have spoken to you; we are always misrepresented, and our voice is not taken seriously," were constant companions during my research.

Processes of Homing among Ethiopian Israelis

Israel as the Promised Land

As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, the notion of homeland and diaspora in the context of Ethiopian Jewish migration (in Hebrew *aliyah*: going up) to Israel is complex. Among the Beta Israel community, life in Ethiopia was viewed as a diaspora experience and Israel as a home that had

been desired for centuries (Kaplan 2005, 382).⁸ The immigration of Jews to Israel is closely linked to the Zionist idea and “[...] some would say the *raison d’être* of the State of Israel” (Kaplan 2010, 72). Zionist ideology dictates that new immigrants (in Hebrew *olim*: those going up) abandon their previous diaspora cultural customs (diaspora in the sense of Jewish communities living outside Israel) in order to adopt an Israeli-Jewish identity (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 23). Steven Kaplan points out that “In narratives and practices Ethiopian Israelis appear to dissociate themselves from such [an Ethiopian] diaspora consciousness in order to affirm their place as Jews returning from Diaspora” (Kaplan 2005, 383). This paradox applies to almost all *olim* in Israel, and is not peculiar to Ethiopian Jews (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 27). The former Ethiopian-Jewish diaspora community, which relies on returning to the Jewish homeland for its very existence, has (now) arrived in the homeland and is caught up in the multicultural Israeli reality. In this context, Lisa Anteby-Yemini refers to dynamics of de-diasporization, re-diasporization, and homing diaspora that are also found among other Jewish migrant groups to Israel, such as those from the former Soviet Union.⁹ These processes question the relationship between homeland and diaspora, especially considering their return as a Jewish migrant group to the Promised Land, where the Zionist idea excludes diasporic identity (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 21 et seq.). In her study on the immigration of Ethiopian Jews, Ravit Talmi-Cohn highlights the fluidity of the shaping of place and time. She emphasizes that migrants move between a time continuum of being-time and meta-time: between the left homeland (Ethiopia) and the new homeland (Israel) maintained through certain practices, contact with family members in Ethiopia, and so on (Talmi-Cohn 2018; see also Talmi-Cohn in this volume).

The complex and multi-layered process of homing Ethiopia in Israel, the establishment of an Israeli-Ethiopian identity, and the search for a place in the multicultural Israeli society, as well as a home and future in Israel, require an understanding of the socio-political and cultural situation of Ethiopian Israelis, which will be developed in the following section.

The Crux of the Promised Land

Today, the Ethiopian community in Israel numbers about 155,300 people, around 1.75% of the Israeli population (CBS 2020). The Beta Israel forms a small Black minority within the multicultural Israeli society (Kaplan 2013; Salamon 2003, 3–4).

⁸ For a further discussion on the question of whether Ethiopia or Israel is considered to be a homeland, see Lyons (2016). ⁹ Further information, see the introduction to this volume.

The promised land offered religious freedom, recognition, secure living and working conditions, but Beta Israel's lives there have been confronted with reality. Everyday examples show that the Jewish status of Ethiopian Israelis is still heavily contested. There are cases, for example, where Ethiopian Jews have been denied work in kosher restaurants or food production facilities because they were not considered to be "proper" Jews. Many Ethiopian Jews even had to undergo a strict conversion procedure to be accepted as Jews. It was only after going through the process of bloodletting¹⁰ that they were accepted as Jews and naturalized under the Law of Return. The Beta Israel fought against this procedure, which was abolished in the mid-1990s. Similarly, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's 1975 decision,¹¹ which denoted their religious recognition as Jews, was not officially recognised by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel until June 2020 (Yerday 2020).

Life in Israel is marked by racial tensions and stereotypes. Ethiopian Jews are confronted with institutional and structural racism,¹² which became clearly visible to the Israeli public in the so-called "blood scandal" that became public in 1996. Blood donations from Ethiopian IDF (Israeli Defence Force) soldiers were systematically sorted out and disposed of because of fear of HIV (Schmemmann 1996; Seeman 2009; Levy & Weingrod 2006, 699). Ethiopian Israelis reacted with a wave of outrage followed by protests (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 27 et seq.).¹³ The protests increased in 2015 as cases of racist police

¹⁰ A symbolic circumcision, in which a drop of blood is taken from the penis of a male Ethiopian immigrant during a ceremony by the Orthodox Jewish establishment to ensure his Jewishness. For women, the symbolic conversion means a ritual bath (*mikveh*, usually on the 7th "clean" day after menstruation). The bathing ritual was used by the rabbinate to recognize the Jewishness of Ethiopian women (Hertzog 1999, xiv). ¹¹ The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel at the time, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, recognised them as descendants of the lost tribe of Dan. In 1975, the Israeli government accepted Rabbi Ovadia's ruling and recognized the Ethiopian Jews known as Beta Israel (House of Israel) as Jews (Anteby-Yemini 2004, 146). ¹² In his article "Ethiopian immigrants in the United States and Israel" published in 2010, Kaplan points out that in a small country like Israel, any mistreatment of Ethiopians is quickly labelled as racism in the national news. He notes that there is little evidence that Ethiopians are subjected to "institutionalized racism," although he makes the point that many Ethiopian Israelis have certainly experienced individual discrimination and racism (Kaplan 2010, 84 et seq.). Considering the events of 2015 and the existing discriminatory police violence against Ethiopian Israelis, this statement must be viewed critically. For more information on racial discrimination among Ethiopian Israelis in Israel, see Kaplan (2013). ¹³ Kaplan cites other examples of racism against Ethiopian Jews besides the blood scandal mentioned above: "[...] the dispensing of a particular form of birth control to Ethiopian women, or the refusal of a school to accept additional Ethiopian students [...]" (Kaplan 2013, 172)

violence against the Ethiopian Israeli soldier Demas Fekadeh, among others, came to light (Yerday 2017). Young people of Ethiopian descent are convicted of crimes more often than their non-Ethiopian peers in percentage terms (Yerday 2019, 3 et seq.). Structural racism is evident, among other things, in the granting of mortgages for residential property. The state grants Ethiopian Israelis particularly low prices for housing in certain areas, but they do not receive mortgages for apartments or houses in other neighbourhoods. In this way, neighbourhoods are created where only Ethiopian Israelis live and which are usually located outside the city centres (for example, in Israeli cities such as Rishon-LeZion, Kiryat Gat, Holon, and Netanya) (Kaplan & Salamon 2014, 27 et seq.). Efrat Yerday sees this as clear paternalism on the part of the Israeli state, which determines where Ethiopian Israelis can live, and gives them no choice in the matter. In the southern city of Ashkelon, for example, there are neighbourhoods that are populated entirely by Ethiopian Israelis (Kaplan 2010, 77; Yerday 2019).

Until the early 2000s, the stereotype of the naive and vulnerable Ethiopian was prevalent. The majority of Ethiopian Jews originally come from rural areas of Ethiopia. Many came to Israel illiterate or with only an elementary education (Anteby-Yemini 2004; Kaplan/Salamon 2014, 29). The Jewish Agency, which is responsible for newcomers (*olim*), felt that the Ethiopian Jews needed special attention in order to be prepared for Israel's industrialized, bureaucracy-ridden society (Kaplan/Salamon 2014, 28; Keidar 2014, 65). However, this supposedly well-intentioned attention quickly turned into paternalism and discrimination. This pattern was reinforced by academics, most of whom worked in the service of the Israeli authorities in the reception centres as social workers while collecting data for their own academic publications. Until the 2000s, most of the publications that emerged from this scenario portrayed Ethiopian Jews as dependent, out of touch with Israeli society, and naive. In recent years, a growing discontent within the Ethiopian Israeli community has come to light and is being publicly expressed by an emancipated second and third generation of Ethiopian Israelis born and raised in Israel. They are fighting for social recognition and economic equality, and are revising the image of "the naive Ethiopian Jew" (see works by Efrat Yerday 2019 & 2020 and Adane Eitan Zawdu Gebyanesh 2019).

In this context, the processes of diasporization of home (Israel) and homing diaspora (Ethiopia) described by Anteby-Yemini are particularly interesting (Anteby-Yemini 2019). What does home mean? What do people do to feel at home? What activities make people feel at home? What temporal dimensions are associated with it?

The following sections delve into these aspects and examine them through the lens of the informal savings association practice known as *equb*. By so

doing, I will connect Anteby-Yemini's concept of the processes of diasporization of home and homing diaspora with Hage's key characteristics on home-making (Hage 1997, 102 et seq.). I will demonstrate that despite initially appearing to be centred around homing of Ethiopia (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 22, 27) and a return to the past, *equb*, is also a future-oriented practice.

Equb Practice in Israel

Equb is a common savings concept in Ethiopia. The Amharic term *equb* refers to a so-called rotating credit association (ROSCA). ROSCAs are defined as follows: "an association formed upon a core of participants who make regular contributions to a fund which is given in whole or in part to each contributor in turn" (Ardener 1995, 1). In Ethiopia, it is common for a group of neighbours, colleagues, or friends to set up an *equb* together. They agree in advance on a monthly amount to be saved and commit to paying it on time. In most cases, there are hardly any written rules. The main stabilising and regulating factors are mutual trust and reputation. No one wants to be seen as unreliable, and so everyone fulfils his or her obligation to pay in regularly (see Nida in this volume).

The fundamental aspects of the practice of *equb* among Ethiopian Israelis, such as the rotating principle, common trust,¹⁴ and oral agreements, remain the same. However, the sociological aspects of forming an *equb* differ. This raises questions about the basis on which these groups are formed. By examining this question and considering the sociological nature of *equb* groups, whether they are comprised of friends, colleagues, or even family networks, I reinforce the notion that *equb* is a practice that contributes to the creation of Ethiopian Israeli identity spaces (Anteby-Yemini 2019).

"It's More about the Time We Spend Together than the Money"

During my fieldwork, I encountered an *equb* group consisting solely of family members, which is uncommon in the Ethiopian context. This group exemplifies the significance placed on family cohesion. Comprising siblings, aunts, and uncles, it has been in existence for a decade and has twelve members. Each month, a total of 12,000 shekels (equivalent to EUR 3,000) is jointly saved, with each member contributing 1,000 shekels. Notably, the regular *equb* meetings have played a significant role in strengthening the family ties among the dispersed brothers and sisters residing across various locations in Israel.

The gatherings follow the typical *equb* meeting format, in which the host of the meeting receives the savings instalment. These meetings take place in different Israeli cities and are accompanied by the serving of Ethiopian

¹⁴ I discuss the issue of trust or mistrust in the context of *equb* groups in Israel in a separate article (Glück 2024).

food and the Ethiopian coffee ceremony (see Figure 3), among other things. What distinguishes this group is the inclusion of a presentation during each meeting. One member of the group presents a topic that is occupying their thoughts, such as their profession or a new hobby. The aim of this practice is to foster a shared understanding of each other's pursuits despite the physical distances between them and the demands of everyday life. Above all, it serves to reinforce the cohesion of the family unit. As aptly expressed by one member of the group, the significance lies not in the monetary aspect, but rather in the reinforcement of family ties (C., Interview, 26 May 2022).¹⁵



Figure 3. *Equb* meeting in Kiryat Gat, Israel, serving Ethiopian coffee (*buna*), fresh bread (*dabo*), and roasted chickpeas.

An offshoot from this family *equb* group, initiated by the children, has developed, and a separate *equb* group has been established among the cousins. Notably, the members of this sub-group are very young, ranging from 16 to 20 years old, and they contribute the modest sum of 50 shekels (equivalent to EUR 20) a month towards the savings. The underlying motivation behind the formation of this group was to provide a platform for the younger generation

¹⁵ The informants have been anonymized by using only the initials of their given names.

to acquire and internalize the values and traditions inherent in Ethiopian culture.¹⁶ The mother behind it, who developed the idea for her daughter to initiate an *equb* group with her cousins, expressed her own disconnection from her Ethiopian heritage. She revealed that she no longer maintained a strong affiliation with her cultural roots, as she had ceased to speak the language (Amharic) fluently and had given up certain cultural practices. Motivated by her own experiences, she aspired to shield her children from undergoing a similar disconnection and sought to foster their appreciation for Ethiopian heritage through active engagement within the *equb* framework (C., Interview, 26 May 2022).

There are several *equb* groups made up exclusively of family members, including the group I. initiated, which stemmed from a similar intention to strengthen the cohesion of families, as they are scattered all over Israel. Their *equb* group was launched shortly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. It is made up of cousins, with a total of 13 members aged between 23 and 38. Their monthly savings rate is 200 shekels (equivalent to EUR 49). The money they accumulate is used for joint leisure activities in order to spend time together. Originally, the group met every month, with interruptions due to the pandemic regulations. However, I. stresses the importance of a feeling of longing, and explains: “We have to miss each other [...], so we meet quarterly” (I., Interview, 29 May 2022).

Z.’s *equb* group is an interesting example that illustrates the diverse sociological characteristics of *equb* groups in the Ethiopian Israeli context. Z. migrated to Israel eleven years ago, and belongs to the group known as the Falash Mura.¹⁷ She is a member of an *equb* group comprising both Ethiopian Israelis and Ethiopian migrant workers, in total twelve members. They collectively save 5,000 shekels a month (equivalent to EUR 1,238), and accumulate a total of 60,000 shekels (equivalent to EUR 14,854). Z.’s *equb* group was initiated by A., an Ethiopian migrant worker who works as waiter in a restaurant in Tel Aviv. Z.’s primary goal for saving through the *equb* is to purchase a flat in Be’er-Sheva, a city in southern Israel. Currently, real estate in Be’er-Sheva is still relatively affordable, and with a substantial student

¹⁶ When I refer to Ethiopian culture or Ethiopian heritage in this article, I am referring to the traditions and cultural markers that originate from the Ethiopian highlands, especially the Amhara and Tigray regions. The main areas of origin of Ethiopian Jews are the Amhara region (especially in Gondar) and Tigray. ¹⁷ The term Falash Mura is a neologism that refers to relatives and descendants of the Beta Israel community who converted to Christianity in Ethiopia (Kaplan 2013, 179). When claiming Israeli citizenship, they emphasise their forced conversion to Christianity while stressing their Jewish identity as the basis for their right to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return (Kaplan 2013, 176–79; see also Seeman 2009).

population in the area, there is significant demand for housing. According to Z., the cost of a property there is around 800,000 shekels (equivalent to EUR 198,052). A.'s saving objectives are less explicit, as the *equb* meeting is primarily about encountering friends, exchanging ideas, and discussing the challenges faced as migrant workers in Israel. It offers a space for mutual support and camaraderie (Z. and A., Interview, 14 October 2021).¹⁸

Homing Equb in Israel

Parallel developments can be observed in the process of establishing an Ethiopian Israeli home, as explained by Anteby-Yemini. Firstly, there is the diasporization of home (Anteby-Yemini 2019, 27). This primarily affects the younger generations, particularly those who were born and raised in Israel (from the 1990s on), who are increasingly embracing their Ethiopian heritage by engaging in activities such as opening Ethiopian restaurants, listening to Ethiopian pop music, being socially active and vocally outspoken (in the media, and by establishing Ethiopian Jewish heritage centres¹⁹) or participating in *equb* groups to uphold Ethiopian cultural values and strengthening family cohesion. Secondly, the process of homing Ethiopia within Israel can be discerned among the older generation those who came as adults to Israel²⁰

¹⁸ A year later, I reconnect with Z., who tells me about the outcomes of her participation in the *equb*. She is no longer a member of the group, having patiently waited until her pay-out was received. With the funds she accumulated, she was able to take out a loan based on her savings rate and purchase an apartment in Haifa, which she currently rents out. She also utilized the money to open a shop in a suburb of Tel Aviv with her father specializing in selling various products imported from Ethiopia, including traditional dresses, coffee cups, *jebena* (Ethiopian coffee pots), hair products, spices, and beer – products tailored to the needs of Ethiopian households, as described by Z. (Z., 13 June 2022, Interview). ¹⁹ There are numerous heritage centres in Israel, funded by the state or privately. Some of them work at a scientific level (the Ethiopian Jewry Heritage Center, and the International Center for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry) and aim to influence scientific discourse and reduce prejudice, while others are more in the socially activist realm (the Association of Ethiopian Jews). Examples include the *Battae* Ethiopian Israeli Heritage Center in the south of Tel Aviv or the *Yerus* centre in Be'er Sheva, which have made it their mission to educate Israeli society (especially youth groups) about the unique journey of Ethiopian Jews to Israel and to refute the narrative propagated by the Israeli state that Ethiopians could only immigrate with Israel's support. ²⁰ The majority of the first generation came either on their own from 1975 onwards (some even before that as illegal immigrants), encouraged by recognition as Jews by the then-Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, or during the Israeli state's two major immigration operations, "Operation Moses" in 1984–85 and "Operation Solomon" in 1991 (Anteby-Yemini 2004, 146; Kaplan & Rosen 1994, 62–66; Yerday 2019, 2 et seq.).

(Anteby-Yemini 2019, 27). In this regard, *equb* gatherings serve as spaces that foster an Ethiopian Israeli identity. These safe havens become imbued with hopes and aspirations, such as cherishing one's Ethiopian heritage, being perceived as a trusted member of the Ethiopian Israeli community and establishing a social support network in times of adversity.

These Ethiopian Israeli ethnic spaces and self-determined activities are essential for asserting oneself and carving out a place within the multicultural Israeli society. As Anteby-Yemini illustrates, drawing from Arjun Appadurai's concept of *ethnoscapes*, the creation of Ethiopian ethnoscapes occurs through linguistic, cultural, religious, social, and media practices, thereby reinventing the native country – Ethiopia – within the imagination of deterritorialized groups (Antebi-Yemini 2019, 26). In this context, Talmi-Cohn emphasizes the oscillation between time states and temporal references (being-time and meta-time²¹), which are nourished through social activities such as *equb* and transnational family bonds (Ethiopia-Israel). Immigration is therefore an ongoing process (Talmi-Cohn 2018). Home-making is thus never completed, but is always aspired to, and is therefore in its essence a future-oriented practice (Hage 1997; Jansen 2008; 2017).

Equb meetings play a significant role in combining spatial and temporal dimensions within the processes of home-making. Temporally, they operate in two distinct manners: firstly, individuals dedicate considerable time and effort to curating a home that aligns with their values and personal preferences. This involves envisioning and investing in a living that reflects their aspirations for a fulfilling life, encapsulating not just the physical elements of a home but also encompassing future-oriented ideas of what constitutes an ideal living environment and a 'good life' (Hage 1997; Fischer 2014). Secondly, the practice of *equb* has a future-oriented perspective, as it serves as a means of transmitting traditions and values to future generations. By shaping a home that encapsulates their cultural heritage, Ethiopian Israelis not only safeguard their own identity but also ensure the continuity of cherished traditions and a sense of rootedness for future generations (Obeid 2013).

Searching for Home and Work and Saving for the Future: Ethiopian and Eritrean Asylum-Seekers in Israel

Israel as a Workaround

According to the UNHCR, more than 80,000 people applied for asylum in Israel between 2006 and 2021. Of these, only 1% were recognised as refugees

²¹ Talmi-Cohn links time dimensions to place-making by saying that the concept of being-time (everyday life) and meta-time (the timeframe that lies in the future and is linked to aspirations and dreams) influences the processes of place-making. In the context of this paper, this refers to home-making processes.

(based on the definition of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees)²² or tolerated in the form of temporary group protection²³ (UNHCR 2021). The latter group includes Eritreans, among others (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012, 102).

Because legal recognition as a refugee in Israel is difficult (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012, 101–2), Israel has a relatively low number of asylum-seekers compared to its neighbouring countries. For most asylum-seekers, Israel is only a stopover on their journey to Europe or Canada. The majority of refugees come from African countries, especially Eritrea and Sudan. Their reasons for fleeing range from political and religious persecution in their home country to forced conscription into the army, which is the case for most young Eritrean men. They choose the dangerous land route via Sudan, Libya, and the Sinai Peninsula for their migration journey, risking imprisonment, torture, and sexual abuse (Anteby-Yemini 2015, 347; Gidron 2020, 133).²⁴ They rely on human traffickers (mainly from Sinai), who charge horrendous prices. After completion of the Egyptian-Israeli barrier in 2012, these prices rose from USD 2,000 in 2009 to USD 50,000 in 2021. Human traffickers take advantage of the precarious situation, threatening torture or the sale of organs if families do not pay a ransom for their relatives (Kalir 2015, 581; Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012, 105; S., Interview, 3 October 2021).

A Precarious Socio-Political Situation and a Contradictory Legal Status

The precarious socio-political situation of asylum-seekers and refugees is a result of their legal status. My focus in this next section will be on Ethiopians and Eritreans. Most of my interlocutors are from the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa or its surroundings. They identify themselves as Amhara or Tigrayan and are Orthodox Christians.²⁵ The majority of the Eritrean interviewees indicated Tigrayan as their ethnicity.²⁶

²² Israel drafted and signed the Refugee Convention in 1951 (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012, 98). ²³ Temporary group protection is usually granted for two reasons: when an unexpectedly high number of asylum-seekers comes from one country, or when people must flee their home country but the circumstances do not fall under the definition of refugee status under the Refugee Convention. If a group is under temporary group protection, UNHCR recommends that they be protected from deportation (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012, 101–2). ²⁴ Some try to reach Europe via Libya first and then across the Mediterranean. Most end up in detention, and then decide to go via Sudan to Israel (S., 4 October 2021, Interview). ²⁵ Ethiopian Jews are not included in this example as they are entitled to Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. ²⁶ However, this sample should not be considered to be a reliable representation of the ethnic composition of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora in Israel.

The legal status of Ethiopian asylum-seekers is complex. They do not fall under temporary group protection, do not receive refugee status, and always face deportation (Gidron 2020, 138). According to my interviewees, most come to Israel on a tourist visa as part of a journey to visit the holy sights of Christianity in Israel. Sarah Willen has called this approach the “tourist loophole.” For many asylum-seekers, this is the only way to circumvent the rigid Israeli migration regime. Many come as tourists or as members of Christian pilgrimages with the intention of overstaying (Willen 2007, 14). Once in Israel, they seek asylum and receive a temporary visa, which they must renew every few months (statements vary). To obtain it, they go to the UNHCR Centre in Tel Aviv, where there is special legal assistance to represent them before the Israeli state. In most cases, their visa is extended for one year, after which they have to repeat the procedure (L., Interview, 3 October 2021).

The legal status of temporary group protection for Eritreans seems to be somewhat more stable²⁷ than that of asylum-seekers without group protection, as is the case with Ethiopians. However, neither group, Eritreans or Ethiopians, is entitled to citizenship rights, work permits, social benefits, medical care, or access to benefits from the Israeli welfare state. Moreover, their status can be revoked at any time (Kalir 2015, 586; Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher 2012, 102).

Nevertheless, according to a ruling by the Israeli High Court, people with the temporary protection status are allowed to work to meet their basic needs and expenses, although this does not protect asylum-seekers from being exploited by their employers. A new Israeli Ministry of Interior regulation of 30 June 2022 has made the working conditions for asylum-seekers even more difficult. It came into force in October 2022, and has caused a great deal of concern and uncertainty among my interlocutors. It states that asylum-seekers who have received group protection from deportation (in this case Eritreans) are restricted to working in four professions: hotels, construction, agriculture, and institutional nursing, and it affects 17 selected cities, which are home to the largest number of asylum-seekers in Israel, mainly in the greater Tel Aviv area (Peleg 2022).

Owing to their lack of work permits and uncertain legal situation, they face discrimination from their employers, and are often treated as undocumented migrant workers with no rights. This leads to exploitative working conditions, including long working hours, low wages, and a lack of protection against

²⁷ Once the asylum-seekers have crossed the border to Israel, the Israeli army takes them to the Saharonim Detention Centre in the Negev desert, where they go through a pre-reception procedure and receive a temporary three-month visa, which they can renew (Kalir 2015, 586).

dismissal (Kalir 2015, 586). As a result, many asylum-seekers take several jobs at the same time to support themselves and to save money for their onward travel (to Canada, for example) or that of their family members (L., Interview, 3 October 2021; S., Interview, 3 October 2021).

Equb: Home on the Move

In her work on migrants in Israel, Willen describes the hardship of being a migrant there and what home and safety means in this context. The spatial dimension of home – one's own flat – is just as insecure as the temporal dimension: there is always the danger of being deported and thus losing one's temporary home in Israel. Willen exemplifies this vague state of feeling home by describing the effects of Israel's large-scale mass deportation campaign (often called *gerush*, Hebrew for deportation, or expulsion in the Israeli media), which was launched in the late summer of 2002 and targeted global migrants "who were illegalised and [Willen argues] 'cast out' by the Israeli state and society" (Willen 2019, 7). During this period, the danger of deportation was ever-present, and migrants' homes, which were often in the south of Tel Aviv, were one of the most unsafe places for them, as there was always the danger of police raids (Willen 2019, 67 et seq.). The spatial and temporal concept of home has not changed between the time of the *gerush* and today. Although there are no longer any large-scale deportation campaigns, migrants mostly share small apartments with several bedrooms in the south of Tel Aviv. Rents in Tel Aviv are too expensive for them to be able to afford their own apartments, and commuting from the suburbs into Tel Aviv, where most work as food deliverers or cleaners in private homes and office buildings, would not be worth it in terms of saved time and money (B., Interview, 27 April 2022). The shared apartments are mainly used for resting, social activities, and the associated feelings of arriving. Integration into the diaspora community and feeling at home take place in public spaces (mostly around the central bus station in Tel Aviv), like coffee bars, restaurants, churches, and parks (Sabar & Posner 2013; Sabar 2007; Willen 2019), and in the case of Ethiopian and Eritrean asylum-seekers are also created by activities such as *equb*.

The daily life of many Eritreans and Ethiopians migrants in Israel is characterised by working several jobs and saving money (S., Interview, 15 October 2021).²⁸ By so doing, they save for an uncertain future, which many do not envision to be in Israel. Their stay in Israel is a stage in their planning for the future, and ranges from a few months to several years (as in the case of S. from Eritrea, who has been in Israel since 2009) or even to finally settling

²⁸ A fact that I also noticed during my field research. In some cases, it was impossible to meet people for interviews because they simply do not have time. In their free time, they meet friends for *equb* meetings.

down in Israel. This is possible through a marriage (mostly Ethiopian Jews) to obtain Israeli citizenship.

In this context, *equb* has established itself as a common savings concept and future-oriented practice in the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community. The parameters of *equb* in the diaspora community are complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, the task of finding trustworthy individuals poses challenges, particularly for asylum-seekers who are finding themselves having to navigate Israeli society independently, while on the other, they find a sense of unity through shared experiences of seeking refuge, a common heritage originating from Eritrea or Ethiopia, a shared language, religious affiliations, and cultural practices such as *equb*. These shared elements often serve as a foundation for establishing trust. S., an asylum-seeker from Eritrea who has resided in Tel Aviv for several years, elaborated on this aspect during an interview: “We choose the *equb* participants from among the people who work with us or live in the same city. That is already enough as a criterion of trustworthiness” (S., Interview, 4 October 2021). Trust is one of the key elements of *equb* groups. It is cultivated through repeated interactions among members, leading to the accumulation of *social capital* and reinforcing solidarity (Ardener 2014). This sense of trust becomes especially crucial when it comes to the selection of new members and the establishment of stable relationships within the group.

Trust and community cohesion are crucial in the heterogeneous Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora in Israel, and they were undoubtedly impacted by the civil war in northern Ethiopia (2020–22). The resulting ethnic tensions between the groups involved – the Ethiopian government under Abiy Ahmed, Eritrea, and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) – unquestionably influenced interactions and life in the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora worldwide. However, during my research in various *equb* groups in Israel, I found that despite political disagreements, which in the case of Ethiopia often extend to the social sphere, common origin and language foster unity within the diaspora. This phenomenon is particularly notable in Israel, where the relatively small Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community finds a common bond through their status as asylum-seekers from Ethiopia or Eritrea. As an example, I attended meetings of an *equb* group that continues to include Eritreans (Tigrayan) and Ethiopians (Amhara and Tigrayan), despite their political disagreements.

Engagement in *equb* groups also encompasses practical considerations. For instance, not everyone has immediate access to a bank account on arrival in Israel. Furthermore, many encounter limitations imposed by financial institutions, which restrict their eligibility for certain services, such as loans. Willen emphasizes that it is often also due to the incompetence of bank employees that although migrants have a right to have their own bank account in principle, their request to open a bank account or take out a loan is rejected (Willen 2019, 260). As a result, migrants often keep the money they save

hidden about their person, and refuse to deposit it anywhere (*ibid.*, 56),²⁹ and they circumvent these situations by paying into *equb* groups, among other mechanisms.

Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants often actively participate not only in a single *equb* group but also in multiple ones, which enables them to save significant sums of money. For instance, D., who is 36 years old, is a member of three *equb* groups. His immigration trajectory involved arriving in Israel as a tourist in 2008, seeking asylum, and subsequently marrying an Ethiopian Jewish woman in 2011, despite being an Orthodox Christian. The marriage gave him a permanent residence permit and an official work permit in Israel. D. has established himself as a successful entrepreneur. He owns a thriving clothing shop for traditional Ethiopian dresses and suits situated at Tel Aviv's central bus station, which serves as a gathering place for the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community. Within these *equb* groups, D. can accumulate 9,000 shekels per month (approximately EUR 2,500) as part of his savings strategy. This practice is driven by a sense of obligation to consistently allocate funds and fulfil payment responsibilities, thereby upholding his reputation as a reliable participant and member of the diaspora community. It also serves as a deterrent against frivolous expenditure on non-essential items like clothing and alcohol. D. finds the exorbitant interest rates on loans demanded by banking institutions unfavourable, which motivates his preference for *equb* groups. Another advantage of participating in *equb* groups lies in the expedited access to funds, and during financial emergencies, the established order of disbursements can be altered, allowing members in urgent need to receive their share of the monthly pay-out ahead of schedule (D., Interview 2 November 2021).

Within the diaspora community, the motivations for saving money through *equb* are very diverse. For instance, D. is saving money to acquire property in Israel, and his objective is to buy a house (D., Interview, 2 November 2021). On the other hand, L., who has lived in Israel for five years, is allocating her savings to her imminent return to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Her plan involves establishing a personal business venture, a hairdressing salon specializing in human hair wigs³⁰ (L., Interview, 3 October 2021). For S., along with numerous Eritrean asylum-seekers, *equb* serves as a viable means of accumulating the funds for his onward journey. Many asylum-seekers in Israel aspire to relocate to Canada in pursuit of better opportunities and a

²⁹ Willen made this observation among her interlocutors during her research on undocumented West African (Nigerian and Ghanaian) and Filipino migrants in the south of Tel Aviv (Willen 2019, 56, 260). ³⁰ She mainly learned this craft in Israel, where the market for human hair wigs is booming. For Jewish Orthodox women, covering one's own hair is a religious custom. Instead of a scarf or beret, many prefer to wear a real hair wig (which is called a *Scheitel* in Yiddish).

‘good life.’ The naturalization process in Canada is relatively straightforward; however, it requires a considerable sum of money. S. expresses his intention to save up to USD 30,000 through an *equb*, which is the amount required as a deposit for a refugee sponsorship programme. By collaborating with Canadian human rights organizations, the possibility of immigrating to Canada emerges. After a year of residence, demonstrating proficiency in English, and securing a permanent job, he will be granted Canadian citizenship (S., Interview, 4 October 2021).³¹ Finally, some individuals use *equb* as a financial mechanism to support their relatives’ migration to Israel or Europe by land routes or even to pay ransoms to human traffickers.

The act of saving through *equb* assumes additional significance beyond the mere accumulation of money. It serves as a symbolic representation of their agency and their determination to shape their own destinies. Their disciplined commitment to saving reflects a conscious effort to take control of their future and pursue a path that aligns with their aspirations for a free and fulfilling existence, for a ‘good life’ (Fischer 2014, 202). *Equb* is a crucial tool for Ethiopian and Eritrean asylum-seekers in Israel to save money in preparation for a more secure future outside the country. This financial strategy is driven by the pursuit of a ‘good life’ that encompasses equal rights, citizenship, and a clear understanding of their ultimate objectives. Through their engagement in *equb*, Ethiopian and Eritrean asylum-seekers actively exercise agency and assert their desire for a life that is not only economically stable but also reflects their values and their aspirations for freedom and wellbeing (Fischer 2014, 207–11).

In the context of migration, individuals experience a constant state of being on the move, seeking a temporal home that may be driven by a yearning for a better future in a different place or nostalgia for a home left behind (Hage 1997, 102 et seq.; Talmi-Cohn 2018). This sense of home is often intricately woven into social activities – in my case study the practice of *equb*. *Equb* encompasses both temporal and spatial aspects, contributing to a feeling of familiarity and belonging, while also holding future-oriented significance (Hage 1997).

³¹ In September 2022, S. was able to fulfil his long-awaited dream and immigrate to Canada with the support of a Canadian friend. His friend, who worked with S. at an Israeli NGO in Tel Aviv, found a group of volunteers to act as guarantors for him. In addition to the guarantee, S. saved over USD 30,000, which will serve as a deposit for his first year in Canada, until he has settled in and found a permanent job.

Conclusion

Equb is a dynamic and multifaceted aspect of home-making within the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community in Israel and among Ethiopian Israelis. Its future-oriented nature underscores its potential as a resilient and adaptive practice that continues to play a central role in the lives of its participants, contributing to their sense of home and belonging within diasporic experiences. It goes beyond its origins by serving not only as a means of saving, but also as an important social framework that strengthens community bonds, family ties, and a supportive community network. Participation in *equb* encourages the creation of a home by providing familiarity and security, thus strengthening cultural ties and fuelling hopes for a stable future.

Within the Ethiopian Israeli community, *equb* sheds light on the multi-layered meanings and implications of home for its participants. It functions as a future-oriented practice rather than being solely focused on a return to the past. Despite its initial appearance as an endeavour rooted in Ethiopian culture, it actually serves as a mechanism for strengthening social ties and family bonds, and establishing a supportive community. The act of participating in a savings association contributes to feelings of home-making, as it provides a sense of familiarity, security, (re-)discovering Ethiopian culture, and hope for the future. By contributing to the establishment of Israel as the homeland for Ethiopian Jews and creating space (both temporally and spatially) for an Ethiopian Israeli identity, *equb* embodies a future-oriented approach. It goes beyond mere nostalgia by actively shaping a sense of belonging and hope for the future. Through it, the Ethiopian Israeli community can build a collective identity that integrates their Ethiopian heritage with their Israeli experiences. It not only strengthens their connection to Israel but also provides a platform for envisioning and pursuing future possibilities within the context of their 'diasporic/homing' journey.

Equb's temporal and spatial dimensions combine to create a unique, multifaceted feeling of home for migrants. It blends elements of nostalgia, the yearning for a future elsewhere, and the comfort of familiar practices within the present. Thus, *equb* represents not only a practical financial arrangement but also a powerful social and emotional construct that contributes to the creation of a home away from home for many Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants. The spatial aspect of *equb* is closely linked to notions of home. The gatherings take place in familiar locales, creating a sense of comfort. These physical spaces serve as hubs in which participants engage in familiar practices, forging bonds of trust and solidarity. In this way, *equb* functions as a spatial home, providing a sense of belonging and community to migrants who might otherwise feel disconnected in their new environments. Furthermore, its temporal dimension has immense significance for migrants facing challenging and burdensome situations, such as juggling multiple jobs or enduring low

wages. Despite these difficulties, *equb* takes on a deeper meaning through its future-oriented nature. The act of saving for a better life in the future instils a sense of hope and purpose in the present. This vision and desire for a more prosperous future lend significance and meaning to their current struggles.

Through these dimensions, *equb* significantly affects the construction of home by being actively influenced by its participants' visions and aspirations, which illustrates a dynamic interplay between the creation of physical and emotional spaces of belonging and the broader visions of home of the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Israel. In this sense, *equb* meetings serve as a temporal nexus, interconnecting present efforts towards creating a meaningful home and the desire to foster enduring connections with the past and future.

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“Someone Else’s Country”: Challenges of Home-Making among the Ethiopian Diaspora in the United Arab Emirates

This article sheds light on the challenges faced by the Ethiopian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates in developing a sense of home towards the host country. It highlights the social, economic, and institutional factors in home-making in the contexts of mobility and security, both in the place of origin and in the destination country. The findings are based on a qualitative ethnographic study conducted in Dubai and Sharjah. Data were collected using semi-structured and informal interviews and observation. The empirical data obtained from the field were qualitatively analysed and are presented in narrative form in this paper. The findings were discussed vis-à-vis existing empirical and theoretical literature.

The study shows that many Ethiopians are living in the country illegally and that their dreams of a better future remain largely unfulfilled, despite high expectations. The lack of stable jobs, the livelihood crisis, and uncondusive immigration policies make it difficult for many Ethiopians to develop a sense of home towards the UAE. Other challenges include inhospitable weather, low levels of cultural and religious integration, and growing mistrust within the Ethiopian migrant community. Meanwhile, the current economic and political crisis in Ethiopia makes return migration unappealing. As a result, the search for a ‘home away from home’ remains a long journey, and many are still looking for a potential home in Europe and North America. Despite the peaceful and welcoming social environment in the UAE, many of the Ethiopian migrants referred to their host country as “yas-saw agar” (someone else’s country). They felt insecure, and harboured nostalgic feelings towards the places they had left before immigrating to the Middle East.

Keywords: institutions, security, mobility, home-making

Introduction

The previous literature on the migration of Ethiopians has focused on aspects of human trafficking (Mesay Tefera 2019) and on remittances and their role in local development and social change (Misgina Asmelash Redehegn et al 2019; Schewel & Asmamaw Legesse Bahir 2019; Asnake Kefale & Zerihun Mohammed 2020). Studies on the situation of Ethiopians in destination countries in general and on aspects of home attachment and belonging have been largely ignored.

The aim of this study is to describe the factors that play a role in home-making among Ethiopians living in the United Arab Emirates. It addresses the question of what spatial and temporal elements (in both the country of origin and the host country) contribute to feelings of home, or the lack of such feelings, towards the host country. It also discusses issues relating to the Ethiopian diaspora's conceptualization of home in the United Arab Emirates and their overall perceptions of the host country. The local political dynamics in the country of origin are also highlighted in order to place things in perspective.

Previous studies on the Ethiopian diaspora in the Middle East have placed a great deal of emphasis on the causes and consequences of irregular labour migration, the living conditions of migrants in host countries, and the types of abuses female migrants in particular experience in these countries (Girmachew Adugna 2017; Merid Tullu 2023). Efforts to explain the factors involved in home feelings (or the lack thereof) in the context of social dynamics in destination countries have been very few and far between. This study tries to fill this gap by addressing the role of existing socio-cultural, economic, and institutional frameworks in migrants' home-making trajectories. The study answers two questions: what resources do Ethiopian migrants in the UAE use to facilitate their integration into the host country; and to what extent have their social capital and host-country situations affected their efforts to integrate themselves into the new environment and enable them build their future in the UAE?

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative study combining primary and secondary data from a variety of sources. A three-month period of ethnographic field-work study was spent in Dubai and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The two locations were chosen because of the large number of Ethiopian migrants living there compared to other destinations. Primary data were collected through informal and semi-structured interviews with 47 key informants (26 women and 21 men aged between 21 and 42) who were selected using purposive sampling. A snowball technique was used to identify the most experienced and articulate informants. Semi-structured interviews and

informal conversations were conducted at different points in time. Observation of migrants' daily lives was also used as a tool to access their lifestyles and draw on their social and personal encounters. Secondary data were collected by reviewing the empirical and theoretical literature. Both published and unpublished materials were used in the course of collecting relevant data about migrants.

As an anthropologist from northern Ethiopia, which was the epicentre of the then ongoing war (2020–22), I absolutely needed to apply principles of reflexive ethnography and observational approaches in which both emic and etic perspectives were harnessed from a wide range of data sources. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, however, a highly-structured interview schedule and focus group discussions were avoided. One major challenge during the data collection processes was raised by the fact that Ethiopian societies, including those in the diaspora, are divided along ethnic lines, and hence suspicions and mistrust dominated relations between the researcher and informants at the outset of the study. This was tackled later on through rapport building and social networking, the sharing of living spaces, food and drinks, and regular participation in major social events. As an Ethiopian researcher with a good command of the national language (Amharic), it was possible for me to interact with informants from all walks of life (both educated and uneducated) belonging to different ethnic identities.

Theoretical Considerations

Diaspora is an all-embracing concept that refers to people who are displaced from their place of origin by migration, immigration, or exile. It denotes movement – the cross-border dispersal of populations and a dislocation from the nation-state or geographic territories that are linked to homeland (Brazier and Mannur 2003).

The concepts of 'home' and 'belonging' have been insufficiently theorized, as they have been treated self-explanatory and an everyday experience (Antonsich 2010). One of the most important issues in the study of diasporas and transnational migration is the definition of what constitutes home, which is an abstract and fluid concept (Erdal 2014). Khalid (1992) argues that the concept of home should not only be understood in terms of a collective memory, but also as an emerging political demand. A connection to home goes beyond pre-existing, well-established ethnic and national identities in the place of origin and the destination (Peteet 2007).

According to Nayak (2021), the purpose of 'home' goes beyond mere living, and includes the nurturing of feelings and a sense of belonging so that life without it becomes fragile. An isolated life alienated from nostalgia and emotions blurs the conceptualization of home at the personal and national level. The author further argues that in the context of a diaspora, home is

used metaphorically to indicate safety and peace in ‘old’ and ‘new’ nation states (ibid.).

The concept of home is a complex subjective experience that goes beyond feelings of nostalgia and embraces inclusion or exclusion created by political and personal struggles. On the one hand, it entails a mythical imagination of where one wants to be with little desire to return to the place of “origin,” while on the other, it takes into account diasporic people’s lived experiences, as embedded in the smell, sounds, heat, dust, grey skies, etc. of a locality (Brah 1996). As also noted by Blunt and Bonnerjee (2019), the dynamic relationship between home and diaspora embraces the process and practice of habitation and mobility, which involve rigid assumptions not only about place, but also about community and cultural identity. The concept of home encompasses not only a spatial but also a temporal dimension (Jansen 2008).

Theoretical approaches that romanticized the relationship between ‘home’ and ‘origin’ have been heavily criticized in the more recent literature. Scholars now view home-making as a dynamic process that is not necessarily tied to immutable territorial identities (Obeid 2013). Jansen (2008) also criticizes the tendency to view communities as organic entities occupying specific territories. Understanding migration as a form of displacement leads to an overstated focus on place. A fundamental question in the diasporic experience relates to the attachment to and desire to return to a defined ‘homeland’ that is intricate and multi-dimensional, as it may signify a plurality of belongings. Often, a dual ontology is implied, with the diasporic subject showing ambivalence towards both a cultural identity and the society to which they have relocated (Brah 1996).

Home-making involves politics and belonging and the formation of boundaries. In relation to this, Fathi and Laoire (2024, 7) noted:

In conceptualizing how migrants imagine and do home/homing, it is important to acknowledge the wider structural contexts in which desires and imaginations are formed and the possibilities of home are opened up or closed off. Such an approach would integrate an understanding of the everyday lived and felt aspects of home-immigration with a critical analysis of the structural contexts in which ‘living and feeling home’ is made possible.

Hage (1997) identifies four important factors in the emergence of a sense of being at home, which include a sense of safety and security to willingly live one’s life in a given physical and social environment; relationships in a way that promotes familiarity through knowledge of the existing space; a collective identity that provides a sense of living in one’s community; and hope for a better life in the future. Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006) discusses five basic elements in the process of belonging that individuals develop based on personal experiences and feelings about places, including autobiographical

(antecedents, memories, and experiences), relational (personal and social ties), cultural (such as language), economic (material conditions) and legal (for example, citizenship or residency). He also argues that this kind of personal attachment to a place is only possible if it is supported by an inclusive socio-spatial environment (ibid.).

In a diaspora context, home is a matter of everyday lived experiences and cannot be understood in isolation from the issue of the material and cultural resources that are made available to migrants at different times. Fathi and Laoire (2024) explain the possibility or impossibility of home-making in terms of two interrelated concepts: ‘intersectionality’ (as marked by aspects of social difference and power), and ‘transnationality,’ in which political and economic regimes become important.

This study attempts to examine how the experiences of Ethiopian diaspora communities in the UAE affect their concept of home in the context of the dynamics of transnational interconnections in the host country. Empirical field data is analysed and discussed against the existing literature on the topic, including the elements of home-making proposed by Hage (1997) and Davis (2006).

Ethiopians in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates (which are also known simply as the Emirates) is an Islamic country in the Middle East bordered by Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar.¹ It is a federation of seven states (emirates): Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Al Khaimah, and Umm Al Quwain (Al-Ulama 1994). The federation was formed in the early 1970s, almost a decade after the discovery of oil. Before 1971, the country had lacked basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and telecommunications (ibid.).

The emerging huge investment in development and the high standard of living in the Emirates attracted large numbers of temporary migrant workers seeking employment opportunities in the country (Malit and Al Youha 2013). Currently, the country has a total population of over 9.5 million people (Worldometer 2023), most of whom have migrated from other countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and the Philippines. Dubai is home to over 3 million people, while Sharjah has more than 1.8 million people. Abu Dhabi, which is the political capital of the UAE, has a population of about 1.1 million (World Population Review 2023).

Entry into the UAE is not bureaucratic, and often does not require complicated procedures. The only documents needed for a tourist visa for the

¹ The country is politically stable, unlike neighbouring Iran and Iraq, and the majority of the population lives along the coast, where access to resources such as fresh water is readily available (Morris 2009).

UAE are a valid passport and an agent to process the visa application based on a commission payable by the beneficiary. No bank statements, letters of support, proof of accommodation, or medical insurance, etc. are required. Most Ethiopians enter the UAE for the first time on either a tourist visa (which is valid for a period of one to three months) or a work/residence visa (also known as *Iqama*) processed by an employer on behalf of the employee. A large amount of money is often required to obtain a temporary visa and a long-term residence permit for skilled or unskilled work, which must be renewed at regular intervals.² Until recently, the immigration rules forbade visitors to renew their tourist visa from within the country, which meant that one had to leave the country first to process the renewal of a short-term visa. An overstay cost visitors 100 Dirhams (about USD 27) a day after the expiry date. In 2022, the UAE Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP) made some reforms to the visa procedures that made tourist-visa extensions possible from inside the country (Gulf Today 2023). However, the challenge for many Ethiopians is the ability to earn enough money on a regular basis to cover such costs.

Notions of 'Immigrant' versus 'Diaspora'

Shuval (2000, 41) defines the term 'diaspora' as follows:

The term diaspora has acquired a broad semantic domain. It now encompasses a motley array of groups such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, and overseas communities. It is used increasingly by displaced persons who feel, maintain, invent or revive a connection with a prior home. Concepts of diaspora include a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return – which can be ambivalent, eschatological or utopian – ongoing support of the homeland and, a collective identity defined by the above relationship.

In the interviews, the term 'migrant' was often used derogatorily by informants, and has traditionally been perceived as referring to someone who moves to non-Western countries, including the Middle East, whereas the term 'diaspora' was commonly used for Ethiopians in Western countries, who were perceived to be more dignified. Informants often used the local term *sdetegna* (migrant) rather than diaspora *per se* to refer to themselves. It follows from this that the feeling people associated with a 'migrant' was one of pity, while for the diaspora it was one of jealousy and envy, because the general understanding was that the diaspora consists of individuals who live comfortably in developed

² Up to 2,000 Dirhams for a visa and 7,000-10,000 Dirhams (about USD 2,500-3,600) for a two-year permit (via the various agents).

countries. This had a lot to do with not just income and livelihood status but also overall lifestyle.

There are many Ethiopians living in various parts of the United Arab Emirates, including the cities of Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, Dubai, Sharjah, and the state of Ajman. In Dubai, many of them live in a district called Dera, which is located in the eastern part of the city. Behind Dera, there is a place called Frij Al Murar (or as many Ethiopians call it Frij-merer), where they run small businesses (coffee and shisha houses, hairdressers, stores, cafes, and restaurants). It is located in a busy neighbourhood divided by narrow streets. It is easy to find anything Ethiopian in this area, from spices and roasted grains to traditional dresses. A few Ethiopian restaurants in the city of Dubai also have African recipes from other regions of the continent that attract non-Ethiopian customers. Many young Ethiopians go to these places to meet their friends and chat with women selling traditionally-made coffee, which helps make up for the friends and family they miss in the places they have left behind. In the evenings and at weekends, friends also meet in the small liquor houses (often called *tela bet*, after the traditional drinking places in Ethiopia) where people enjoy alcoholic drinks, music, and dancing. This platform is used to exchange information on a variety of economic, social, and political issues, as well as to discuss mutual plans and dreams. Ethiopians also gather at important religious festivals and institutions such as church,³ where services are held on Sundays. There is also a community of Ethiopians organized by the Ethiopian Embassy in Abu Dhabi. The consular office in Dubai also expedites various activities for Ethiopians, including passport renewals.

The United Arab Emirates has traditionally been one of the preferred destinations in the Middle East for low-profile Ethiopian migrants who decide to leave for economic reasons. Poverty has been one of the main drivers at the place of origin, but recent political developments and conflicts have also triggered new waves of migration to the region. As a result, the better-educated form a relatively newer class of migrants in the UAE today. Ethiopian migrants in the UAE therefore generally fall into one of three main groups: young male and female unskilled domestic workers employed in private households as nannies or in the construction sector as labourers; those involved in small businesses; and a small number of educated people working in white-collar jobs for the government and private companies. Some also work as sales representatives, while others are taxi drivers.

³ Following a state visit of the prime minister of Ethiopia in 2020, the UAE government pledged to issue residence permits for over 10,000 Ethiopians and to provide plots of land for the construction of places of worship for Christians (Borkena 2020).

Migrants' Perceptions of the Host Country and Home-Making

The UAE is a preferred destination for migrants because despite the high cost of living, it is relatively easy to obtain an entry visa. It is also considered to be less culturally and linguistically conservative compared to other countries in the Middle East. However, one major challenge is that the country has no asylum programmes for foreigners, which makes it difficult for migrants to integrate into Emirati society. In the wake of this exclusionist policy, the possibility that migrants will accept their new environment as home is reduced. As Fathi and Laoire (2024, 7) have stated, "Migrants in different legal and social positions, with different levels of material or cultural resources, will imagine and 'do' home differently," and as Howlett-Southgate (2021) have also noted, the asylum regimes in a number of host countries intentionally place restrictions on the possibilities of home-making by migrants.

Ethiopian migrants retain an essential element of their culture in the host country. In an informal one-on-one conversation, an educated informant reported that the social distancing Ethiopians exhibit in a foreign country can be partly explained by the lack of incorporation into a global order brought about by a colonial experience and a preoccupation with their own history, language, culture, and religious orientation (including a different calendar, time calculation, etc.). "Ethiopians take pride in being unique" he remarked.

Some Ethiopians in the UAE have already had several experiences of migration in the region. Many face the dilemma of whether to stay in the Middle East illegally or return empty-handed before their temporary visas expire. Although it is not an easy decision, they often tend to choose the former, as an unsuccessful return home would mean a poor reception from family members and relatives. One example of this is Solomon,⁴ who first immigrated to Saudi Arabia and worked as a shepherd in rural areas of the country for less than a year, but was later replaced by someone the employer decided was more efficient. When Solomon returned to Ethiopia, he was met with severe criticism from his family, relatives, and friends, who had higher expectations of him. Economic hardships and social pressures forced him to emigrate again, this time to Dubai, where he faced similar challenges. He did not speak Arabic and his English was not very good either. His siblings kept asking him to send money, as they knew nothing of his predicament. He never dared to tell them about his bad situation because he was ashamed and did not want them to worry about his future. He is currently living with Ethiopian compatriots who have allowed him to share basic facilities with them. He said:

⁴ The informants' real names have been concealed throughout this article for the sake of privacy.

“Family members expect us to send money as soon as we get here. They think the money will flow our way the moment we arrive. The reality is that this country is like hell for me. I feel like a fish out of water.” (Solomon, 28 May 2022)

How do Ethiopians in the United Arab Emirates Define their Homeland?

It is not easy to find a direct translation of the term ‘homeland’ in the Ethiopian vernacular. The usual term for home is *agar* (a synonym for the English word ‘country’). In the middle of informal conversations, my interviewees often said ‘*man enda agar*,’ which means ‘nothing is like home,’ while the host country was often referred to as ‘*ya saw agar*,’ meaning ‘someone else’s country.’ This clearly indicates that what informants call ‘home’ is associated with the place they left during migration.

Respondents defined home in terms of physical and social features that fostered a sense of a ‘we feeling’ and made up their identities – features that made them distinct from ‘others.’ Physical and geographical landscapes such as mountains, rivers, trees, and housing, as well as socio-cultural attributes like norms, language, and religion played key roles in the notion of home. Some informants used the phrase “*ya wanzie lij*” (son of my river) to indicate that people who grew up in the same area belonged together. For others, ‘home’ is the place where they were born and raised, and where they had a comfortable life (not necessarily defined in terms of socio-economic status) among ‘their own’ people. Home is where the umbilical cord was buried at birth. The same explanation is offered when it comes to death. When someone dies, their body is never buried outside their country of citizenship unless the dead person has no identification, family, friends, or acquaintances to claim the body. As one informant said: “In our prayers, we often say: *fetari hoy moten bagere argew* (Dear God, please let my death be in my country).” An Amharic poem that was posted on the Facebook page of the Ethiopian community in Dubai⁵ supports this:

ከሀገሩ የወጣ ሀገሩ እስኪመለስ
ቢጭኑት አህያ ቢለጉሙት ፈረስ!
ሀልምና ናፍቆት አምዬ ሀገሪ
እንደወጣሁ አልቅር ከአንቺ ይሁን ቀብረ!

One who leaves his country [...] until he returns to his country
You may push him like a donkey, and tame him like a horse!
My dream and longing, O my dear country [...]
I will never get lost, as my burial will be with you!

⁵ Ethiopian Community, UAE, Dubai, Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064342675792/search/?q=ፈረስ>.

The ‘home is where the umbilical cord was buried’ rhetoric did not go down so well with others, however: being born in a certain place is something, but it is certainly not everything. As one informant put it, “You can be born in a place but still not have good memories of it because you did not grow up there.” None of the people who provided data for this study were born in the UAE: almost all of them had come as young migrants, travelling back and forth between the UAE, Ethiopia, and other countries in the Gulf region at various times.

The geographical proximity to Ethiopia facilitates the connection with the country of origin, making it easier to arrange occasional visits. A number of individuals also travelled frequently to Dubai from Addis Ababa to take advantage of short-term business opportunities. Their trips indicate strong ties to their country of origin. Some informants claimed that a strong sense of home did not materialize until they left their country of origin because it was difficult for them to envisage what life overseas would look like before they migrated. As Cuba & Hummon (1993) also stated, mobility does not erode the process of identifying with a place; rather, it strengthens one’s awareness of home better than in situations of immobility.

The study attempted to examine some of the key factors involved in home-making among Ethiopian migrants in the United Arab Emirates. They include timing, emotional attachment to the host, relationships, the availability of opportunities and facilities, hope and expectation of a better future, and sense of security (Hage 1997; Jansen 2008). In the context of Ethiopians living in the UAE, the factors are discussed below.

The Spatial and Temporal Aspects of Home

Feelings of home experienced by diasporas depend to a large degree on the extent of attachment, connectivity, rootedness, and familiarity with destinations across time (Obeid 2013). One of the key questions I asked Ethiopians in the United Arab Emirates was whether they had a specific place they called home, and whether it was the only place that met the attributes of a home. It was clear from the interviews with the participants in this study that the term ‘home’ must not be understood in absolute terms, and is relative in the context of multiple mobility experiences. A geographical place where one has lived for a longer period of time is considered more home-like than a place one has only visited briefly. Those informants who arrived in the UAE from rural parts of Ethiopia considered Addis Ababa and other cities in their region to be their home until they finally reached the specific villages where their ‘roots’ were. It is therefore possible to envisage multiple homes in different contexts.

The temporal aspect of home-making was investigated by asking informants whether their identification with a particular home had changed over time. The results show that home-making is fluid and dynamic, and the

informants saw it as a process that evolves over time. The younger generation wanted to invest in their future by exploring potential homes outside their country of origin, while the older migrants had fewer ambitions like these, and hence demonstrated a more static perspective towards home-making as they had to deal with other challenges in their lives.

Factors in Home-Making

Reception by the Host

Unlike in other parts of the world, such as the US, where Latinos are asked to return home, leading to the emergence of the #I'mAlreadyHome movement (Corrales-Øverlid 2021), local Emirati, who are a minority in their own country, do not adopt a dismissive attitude towards foreigners, including Ethiopians. Throughout the fieldwork period, there were no popular demonstrations or political agitations against immigrants. Previous studies have shown that locals are generally positive towards immigrants. For example, in his study on the relationship between migration and transformation, Errichiello (2023) quotes a 19-year-old Emirati woman as saying:

We [Emiratis] are a minority in our country now, we see these people coming from all over around the world, not just let's say as labourers, just to work here. I mean, my opinion is that these people have built and are building our country, what could we do? What would Dubai be without them? Really, that is the truth. (Errichiello 2023, 189)

As pointed out in the previous section, however, the government's indifference and tight controls were felt everywhere. The willingness to integrate migrants into the system was far from satisfactory. As one of the informants said,

I think the UAE government cares less about our fate in this country. The government is more interested in syphoning off our money through various mechanisms. This country does not live on oil, but on migrant resources. (Zemedkun, 22 August 2022)

In addition, migrants from certain African countries are often involved in illegal and criminal activities, making them disproportionately vulnerable to arbitrary arrests by the secret services and Dubai police (CID). There was not really a time when Ethiopians were specifically targeted as a group, but the police crackdown often put everyone in a state of fear, so much so that migrants sometimes decided to stay indoors to avoid summary arrests. One of the informants said:

Even with the right papers, I do not dare to walk freely through the streets of Dubai. I am always reminded that I am different. I stand out as a foreigner. In my country, no one would bother me. I feel like I belong with the people. They are like me. (Melaku, 5 June 2022)

Many informants indicated that they felt unsafe in the UAE and only wanted to live there temporarily, and some said that they wanted to join their relatives and friends in Europe and North America (particularly the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom). By moving to these countries, migrants believed they would be able to improve their overall socioeconomic conditions and more importantly, their status as international migrants.

The migrants who came to the UAE from rural areas of Ethiopia generally found it difficult to cope with the demands of urban life in a major city. Finding the right accommodation, dealing with other people, and providing efficient services to clients and employers require some training and prior experience. Many of them were disadvantaged because of the culture shock brought about by an intimidating lifestyle in which individuals were forced to act responsibly in order to make money. The high cost of living in cities like Dubai also made life difficult for people with low incomes. “*Ezih agar genzebu barakat yelewum* (in this country, money is earned and spent),” one of the informants said.

The largely unfavourable conditions in the host country lead migrants to feel structurally alienated, to have a sense of being a stranger in the new environment. Migrants returning from the region often advise their friends in their country of origin to plan carefully before considering international migration. Potential migrants are also repeatedly educated through local media campaigns about the dangers of the unplanned, erratic mobility of people from low-income countries to the Middle East. Reports of deaths and suffering of illegal migrants from the Horn of Africa have also appeared in the various media. However, given the persistent poverty in Ethiopia, the influx of migrants to countries like the United Arab Emirates continues unabated even today, and they take all kinds of risks to earn a living and support their families.

Relationships and Affective Feelings

Ethiopians generally migrate to the UAE as individual members of a family that has roots in its country of origin. Often, it is not the entire family that decides to migrate, but only a few members. The decision-making process has its own course to run, and it can be lengthy, as potential migrants gather data before committing themselves to international migration. Usually, a large number of people (family members, relatives, and friends) are involved in the planning process, although many uneducated migrants make these decisions based on limited information, which drives them towards an unexpected challenge.

Members of the diaspora maintain strong ties to key networks in Ethiopia after they arrive in their destination country. They send remittances to close relatives, call regularly, and ask about the condition of those they have left

behind. The emotional attachment to the place of origin therefore remains high, regardless of the level of financial success and the strength of the networks in the host country. The nostalgic feeling is often directed not only at the people, but also at the geographic location itself. As one informant noted, "You never forget the place where you grew up as a child." In a more general sense, Ethiopians take pride in their national identity, and in ordinary conversations, some informants used the statement "*Ethiopiawi kuru hizb naw* (Ethiopians are proud citizens)" to emphasize their patriotic feelings, even though the pressure to leave the country behind to seek a better future elsewhere is growing stronger.

Ethiopian migrants do not generally feel that they are a minority in their host countries because of the diversity of migrants in terms of countries of origin. However, many of the people who come from countries like Pakistan and other, mainly West African, countries are Muslim, and hence are more disposed to establish stronger relations with locals than with Ethiopians. Most of the Ethiopian migrants come from northern Ethiopia, where a conservative Christian tradition prevails, and so there is rarely a willingness to mingle fully with Islamic culture. At an interpersonal level, lasting transnational relationships between Ethiopians and other groups are rare, except for limited trade and work-related ties. Marriages between Ethiopians and members of other communities are also extremely unusual. The few exceptions of heterosexual relationships with others tend to be casual and short-lived, although it is not always easy to generalize.

Relationships between female domestic workers and their employers are particularly troubled. Some informants indicated that human rights violations were very common, in the form of assigning excessive unpaid work, unlawfully withholding of wages, confiscating passports, and discriminatory hiring and firing procedures, to name a few examples. Workers are reluctant to take legal action against their employers for fear of being imprisoned or deported, so they choose to endure mistreatment in the absence of legal and institutional provisions to protect their rights.

Feelings of Security

Migrants gave different answers about whether they felt safe and integrated depending on the length of their stay and the level of their social ties. Newcomers indicated that it was difficult for them to move around Dubai because they did not know how the system worked and because they thought some people might be unfriendly to them, so they stayed at home the majority of the time. Most of my informants lived in Ethiopian-run hostels, sleeping in bunk beds and sharing apartments with several other people. Despite the congestion, however, they enjoy social warmth, sometimes discussing topics

of common interest over coffee or tea or shared meals (depending on the level of familiarity). A 21-year-old informant describes the situation as follows:

I came here almost a month ago because I felt it was high time, I supported my family. I was not successful at school, so the prospects for me were not good. It did not actually matter because even university graduates (in Ethiopia) do not have jobs. I only came here to make up for my defects. But it's not easy to find work. I know one has to roam around the city looking for opportunities, but I am afraid to do so because I might get lost somewhere. I know neither the places nor the people nor the language. (Yohannes, 17 June 2022)

Those who have stayed longer tend to be more independent and to have a clearer plan for building a better future. However, there is the question of how long they want to stay in the UAE and what this means for developing feelings of home. Many of them said that the longer they stayed, the more secure they felt in the country. Gradually, a sense of freedom and belonging developed until some incident occurs when they have to show their passports and legal permits, reminding them that they are actually from another country and should act accordingly.

With the UAE's current immigration policy, it is difficult to obtain Emirati citizenship, regardless of how long one stays in the country. This is a paradox if one considers the important role migrant workers have played in the country's socioeconomic transformation over the past four decades (Errichiello 2023).

On the other hand, informants reported that they found the UAE to be a very peaceful country despite its diversity. As one noted:

In our country (Ethiopia), a lot of profiling is done based on identities. People kill each other mercilessly because of their ethnicity. Here, people come from different countries and only care about their business. (Adamu, 20 August 2022)

Ethiopians also appreciated the low level of crime in the country. Relations among the different migrant populations are also good. The friendly atmosphere in the streets of Dubai between the locals and the migrant communities is seen as an example to other countries where cultural and religious intolerance is very common. For example, it is in sharp contrast to the way Ethiopian migrants are treated in South Africa (Ayalkibet Berhanu Tesfaye 2017).

Opportunities and Facilities

For many Ethiopians, the quest for a possible permanent settlement in the UAE is thwarted by the lack of good prospects in the country. One of my informants used the Tigrigna phrase '*hilfet zeyblu*,' meaning 'no good prospects.' However, migrants face the dilemma of having to choose between the absolute lack of opportunities in their place of origin and a better situation

with difficult living conditions in the host country. These elements are reflected in the definition of home.

Job security was cited by informants as a major concern. Housemaids were often fired by their employers for various reasons and were without a livelihood for a long time until they found a new job. One 27-year-old informant related her own story:

I worked as a maid in a house that belonged to a couple with two children. My job was to clean the rooms regularly while another girl from the Philippines took care of the cooking and similar activities. At first, I had a very good relationship with the couple, especially with the husband. However, after some time, my relationship with the wife deteriorated. She began to reproach me for no apparent reason. She often said that the floor and window panes were not clean enough. She insulted and threatened me and said she would send me back to my country without a salary. I tried to do my job as well as I could, and was very careful not to leave a smudge of dirt on what I was trying to clean. But that did not change the situation. The woman's anger and annoyance increased day by day until she finally called me into the living room to give me the bad news that I had been fired. I was devastated because I did not know many people in town. I thought it was the end of my life. She kept my records, but I had to leave. As I was roaming around the city of Dubai, I met a woman from my area and told her my story. She took pity on me and took me to her home. She rented an apartment in a hostel. Now I live with her. In return, I clean the living rooms, the bathroom and the kitchen without payment. (Kiros, 19 May 2022)

The same can be true for contract employees, especially in private companies. Alem, who is 41 years old, tells her own story as follows:

I worked in a textile company with another close friend of mine from the Oromia region of Ethiopia. We were intimate friends. We worked as sales representatives for a woman who did not know Arabic. We both spoke Arabic as well as English. We used digital platforms to promote different garments. Sometimes we worked outside office hours and at weekends. We were able to attract many customers, and she was satisfied with our services. She even promised us a raise. Early one morning, I went to my workplace as usual. My friend also arrived at about the same time. What we found there was totally unexpected. The owner stood at the gate and prevented us from entering. She was so angry that she could not control her rage and accused us of conspiring and doing secret business in her name. She fired both of us for no apparent reason until at some point, she could not find a good replacement and showed signs of remorse. She probably thought of giving us our jobs back. But by then it was too late, because we had already said: Never again! (Alem, 23 May 2022)

The low level of success has meant that some migrants have not only been unable to repay the debts they have already incurred to cover the cost of migrating, but have also had to take out further loans to pay for food and

accommodation after arriving in their destination country. Sometimes, they are forced to look for additional side jobs to maximize their incomes and reduce the risk of unemployment. Regardless of how successful they are economically, members of the Ethiopian diaspora do not choose to invite other members of their kinship group to join them, suggesting that it is a short-term escape rather than a permanent stay.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, Ethiopians who ran small businesses had to endure moments of economic shock and crisis that led to the closure of cafes and shisha houses. Some are still struggling to get back on their feet in the post-Coronavirus era.

Many Ethiopians in the UAE face unemployment and poor living conditions regardless of any differences in skills. For most high-level migrants, finding professional employment has not been easy. A typical example is Dawit, 43 years old,

Dawit had been living in Addis Ababa with his wife and children. He earned a master's degree in IT and worked as a web developer while his wife helped him manage a cafeteria. In 2020, he decided to emigrate to the UAE after political unrest in Ethiopia led to ethnic profiling, which left him unsettled in the face of mass arrests and detentions of people of Tigray origin in many parts of the country. His search for jobs in Dubai was unsuccessful. He sent his CV to many companies and made repeated applications, but none materialized. Finally, he decided to work as a facilitator with other ordinary Ethiopians recruiting and placing domestic workers from Ethiopia to make a living. (Dawit, 16 August 2022)

It is interesting to note, despite this description of migrants' low financial status, that economic success has never played a decisive role in the process of building feelings of homeland among the diaspora Ethiopians in the research sites. One of the informants remarked:

Home is home, whether you are rich or poor. What matters is the reactions of others to your presence here, whether others treat you as one of them or as someone else? (Tadesse, 22 June 2022)

This only tells part of the story, however; an equally important factor is whether the immigrant sees himself as another or as part of the system: that is, whether he adapts well to and accepts and internalizes the demands of the new environment. This goes along with what Hage (1997) describes as 'familiarity' and 'security.'

Finally, these stories should not be allowed to overshadow the many success stories of Ethiopian migrants making a good living in Dubai. For example, there are many cab drivers working for the government and private transport companies; some are salaried, while others work on commission. Exchanging foreign money for Ethiopian local currency in informal markets can greatly

improve livelihoods in the country of origin although these underground banking systems⁶ are illegal in both the country of origin and the host country.

Political Situation and Conflict in Ethiopia

Recent political developments in Ethiopia have had their own impact on what places can be called home at various levels, even within the country of origin. Government actions to solidify ethnic boundaries in Ethiopia have forced citizens to redefine what they mean by home. Despite the presence of a large number of Ethiopians in the UAE, a firm sense of community has yet to be realized. Given the current situation in the country of origin (regionalism and ethnic polarization), there is an increasing fragmentation of Ethiopian diaspora groups in exile, and the UAE is no exception to this. Divisions and mistrust at a political level have trickled down to social relations, and have affected their definition of home. In the middle of an informal conversation, one informant remarked: “We all have an Ethiopian passport, but we are also internally divided nowadays.” The owner of an Ethiopian restaurant in Sharjah stated:

In the good old days, we Habesha (people of Ethiopian origin), had a strong bond with each other... As soon as a newcomer arrived here, we welcomed him or her warmly, visited each other on different occasions, and shared food and drinks together. But now the situation has changed... the good times are over... things have fallen apart. (Tigistu, 9 June 2022)

The conflict between the Tigray region and the Ethiopian government and the subsequent two-year war in northern Ethiopia that broke out in November 2020 drove a good number of ethnic Tigrayans to the UAE. Tigrayans who had been living in other parts of the country were subjected to mass arrest and detention, and many others emigrated to avoid ethnic profiling and persecution. The UAE was one of the destinations. Most of the political migrants who came to Dubai to escape war and persecution returned to Ethiopia after November 2022, when peace was restored following the Pretoria Agreement.⁷ One notable example was one of my informants (a former taxi driver) who worked in Dubai for a few years and then returned to Addis Ababa. He has now become a trader, and commutes to Dubai regularly to buy goods and sell them in Ethiopia. These developments have had a

⁶ This informal money transfer system is called *hawala*. Money is sent to a person living abroad in exchange for a transfer of the equivalent amount in local currency in the home country. ⁷ In November 2022, a peace agreement was signed in Pretoria, South Africa between the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Federal Government of Ethiopia that brought relative normalcy to Northern Ethiopia and enabled those who fled the country to return home.

far-reaching impact on how people adjust to their new environment, and have had an adverse effect on social cohesion, integration, and home feeling.

Discussion and Conclusion

The intention of this analysis has been to show whether Ethiopians feel at home in the UAE in the context of the prevailing economic, social, and structural factors at the migrants' point of departure and arrival. The evidence suggests that there are immutable reasons that prevent it from becoming a reality. There are two dimensions that need to be discussed in the context of home-making: the tendency of Ethiopians to successfully integrate into the host population; and building a strong Ethiopian community in the UAE to effectively socialise individuals into the system. The data presented above show that both the integrative and transnational ties of Ethiopians seem to be weak. A strong attachment to the place of origin is demonstrated by the fact that many Ethiopian migrants live in specific locations in Dubai that "feel like home," gathering around the religious institutions and Ethiopian-owned establishments such as shops and restaurants. Raj (2014, 88) describes a similar situation with Chinese communities in England:

Chinatown in London is an instance of how the Chinese population form their familiar space to make themselves feel at home and create a sense of belonging at where they are – home away from home.

The results obtained here contradict previous research carried out in other parts of the world. For example, in her study of Peruvian migrants in the United States, Corrales-Overlid (2021) argues that problems relating to documentation and legal status under the Trump administration did not prevent migrants from feeling at home in their new environment. In the United Arab Emirates, the lack of adequate government policies for integrating immigrants has contributed to their disenfranchisement and a feeling of being segregated that ultimately leads to a lack of belongingness. The results also show that home-making is tied to past circumstances (the collective memory of a place), current developments (social interactions and cultural integration), and future prospects (the hopes for a better future). This is consistent with the framework proposed by Brun and Fábos (2015), who also adopted a multidimensional approach to home-making that involved several elements, including historical and political scenarios.

The situation of Ethiopian migrants in the UAE explains what Okólski (2012) calls 'incomplete migration,' as the endpoint of their international mobility is unknown. Relocation to the Middle East is only the beginning of a journey, a means to an end and a prelude to permanent settlement elsewhere. Finally, as also noted by Erdal (2014), locating a home brings

cognitive and emotive features into play that combine rational decision-making based on achievements and prospects with sentimental attachments to place, culture, and identities. In the context of diasporic Ethiopians in the UAE, this is explained in terms of material and psychological prospects, stability, nostalgic connections, and social warmth. Structural and institutional factors also influence the extent of integration and inter-community bonds in a diverse society, ultimately affecting home-making through migrants' lived experiences.

As a result, the UAE is perceived by the vast majority of Ethiopians living there as a place to make a living (although expectations still outweigh achievements) rather than a home *per se*. In ordinary conversations, transnational migrants often use phrases like 'my homeland,' 'my second home,' and 'home away from home.' In interviews and discussions with Ethiopians in the UAE, however, these expressions rarely surfaced quite as vividly. The research findings show that multiple factors contribute to secondary migration or return migration of Ethiopians from the UAE, including the lack of opportunities and a conducive environment, the inability to use one's potential, marginalization and discriminatory practices, homesickness and the need to reunite with the family at the place of origin, problems with integration, and a general sense of patriotism towards the country of origin.

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Michael Emru Tadesse

The Black Social Solidarity Economy in Germany: A Study of ROSCAs of the Ethiopian Diaspora*

The Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA) is an enduring type of informal financial institution that can be found all over the world. Nevertheless, while the ROSCAs in Africa, Asia, and South America have been well studied, those in Europe, North America, and the Middle East have been neglected. This is especially true in the case of Ethiopian ROSCAs (*equbs*) in the context of Europe and Germany. The purpose of this study was to examine the ROSCAs of the Ethiopian diaspora in Germany in relation to the concept of the Black Social Solidarity Economy (BSSE). In doing so, it also sought to document and illustrate the contribution made by the Ethiopian diaspora to the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) in Germany. The study used a qualitative study design in which data were collected through thorough semi-structured interviews with eight individual participants selected from eight different *equbs* in Berlin and Munich. Based on the collected data, the study thematically classified and discussed the characteristics of *equbs* in Germany in relation to the features of the BSSE. The results showed that *equbs* in Germany are excellent examples of the BSSE. While helping their members to build a new home and future in Germany, they also provided an alternative form of finance to the capitalist finance system, indicating that there may even be non-capitalist ways of doing finance in the Western world, which is identified with capitalism.

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Keywords: Black Social Solidarity Economy (BSSE), informal financial institutions, People of African Descent (PAD), racial capitalism, Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA)

Introduction

This study focuses on one of the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) institutions of Ethiopians and the Ethiopian diaspora: the Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA).² The ROSCA is an informal financial institution that can be found all over the world (Ardener 1964; Bouman 1977). Various societies and countries have their own versions of ROSCAs under various names, including: *equb*³ (Ethiopia); *djanggi* (Cameroon); *gameya* (Egypt); *chitty* (India); and *partners* (Jamaica) (Bouman 1977). A ROSCA has been defined as “[a]n association formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is given, in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation” (Ardener 1964, 201).

An example of the simplest type of ROSCA would be as follows. Ten people meet every month, and each contributes EUR 1. The money collected from the meeting (EUR 10) is immediately given to one of the members, by using the lottery method, for example. The same procedure is repeated every month for a total of 10 months so that each member receives the fund (EUR 10) in rotation. At the end of the tenth month, after every member has received the fund, the ROSCA cycle is concluded, at which point either a new cycle is started or the ROSCA is dissolved altogether. Both the definition and the example show that rotation and regularity are the two basic principles of a ROSCA (Ardener 1964).

ROSCAs have multifaceted important functions. The most obvious is the provision of small-scale savings (capital formation) and credit. To some extent, they also function as money markets. ROSCAs also have a social aspect, which is related to the solidarity of the kinship group, neighbourhood, or friendship (Ardener 1964).

The definition, principles, functions, and other features of ROSCAs observed in other countries are also evident among Ethiopian ROSCAs (*equbs*). Dejene Aredo (2004) has argued that the main characteristics of *equb* in Ethiopia are generally the same as ROSCAs in other countries. They are: regular saving into a common pool; the withdrawal of funds on a rotational basis using different procedures (the lottery method, for example); operating with minimum financial intermediation transactional costs; the development

² This paper is a short version of my MA thesis (Tadesse 2020), which was presented during the online workshop entitled “Saving and Being Safe Away from Home” in April 2022. ³ *ፎቅብ* (*equb*) is the Amharic name of Ethiopian ROSCAs. It is worth noting that the English literature on the subject has used different spellings, including *equb*, *iqub*, *iqqub*, and *iquib*.

of dynamism in mobilizing domestic savings; and the adoption of innovative mechanisms to deal with the problems of information asymmetry and defaults. Dejene Aredo (2004) has concluded that *equb* is a form of ROSCA that is based on the local conditions in Ethiopia, which vary from place to place.

Studies show that the *equb* has been used by Ethiopians for very many years. In Ethiopia, people of various ethnicities, social classes, genders, age groups, and places of residence (urban and rural) have used the *equb* and benefited from it (Dejene Aredo 1993; Girma Begashaw 1978). In Ethiopia, the *equb* makes economic sense in relation to the provision of financial services and the associated benefits. Furthermore, it enables collective action and strengthens social relations (Dejene Aredo 1993). It has also been used by Ethiopian immigrants living abroad (Lehmann & Smets 2019; Getachew Mequanent 1996); however, very little is known about *equbs* in the Ethiopian diaspora.

I found studying *equb* in Germany indispensable because I had noted a number of knowledge gaps in the study of them (and other ROSCAs). First, most of the studies on *equb* and other ROSCAs were carried out in Africa, Asia, and South America, and there have been only a few studies of ROSCAs in the West, especially in Europe. Hossein has observed that “little is known about the phenomenon of ROSCAs in developed countries” (2017a, 32). Second, when I started planning this study in 2018, there was only one study available on *equbs* in the West,⁴ conducted by Getachew Mequanent (1996) in Canada. It had been more than two decades since it was published, and many changes have occurred since then. There was no study available in the context of Europe. Recently, I found one study that was conducted in Europe by Lehmann and Smets (2019) in the Netherlands, focusing on financial self-help groups among Ethiopians and Ghanaians and the concept of (social) resilience. Third, there were no studies of Ethiopian *equb* in Germany, despite the presence of a relatively large number of Ethiopian immigrants and their informal financial institutions. Finally, none of the studies on *equb* conceptualized the system in relation to the concept of the Black Social Solidarity Economy (BSSE). Instead, they primarily focused on immigrant/refugee adjustment processes (Getachew Mequanent 1996), gender (Salamon et al. 2009), and the resilience and diversity of the financial landscape (Lehmann & Smets 2019).

The purpose of this study is therefore to examine the nature of ROSCAs (*equbs*) in the Ethiopian diasporas in Germany in relation to the concept of the BSSE. In so doing, it also seeks to document and illustrate the contribution of Ethiopian diasporas to the SSE in general and the BSSE in particular in

⁴ Later, I found another study conducted in Israel by Salamon et al. (2009).

Germany. To achieve this, I posed two interrelated research questions: what are the major characteristics of *equbs* of the Ethiopian diasporas in Germany? And: how and to what extent can the characteristics of *equbs* of the Ethiopian diasporas in Germany be considered to be part of the BSSE in Germany? The purpose of this study aligns with the overall theme of the special issue, which is “Home- and Future- Making in the Ethiopian Diaspora.” This is especially true in relation to the discussion of how people work towards a ‘good life’ and a ‘good future.’ As discussed in the subsequent sections of the paper, it also agrees with Ortner’s (2016) assertion regarding the importance of moving beyond opposing neoliberalism and imagining better ways of living and better futures. This study highlights the fact that *equbs* in Germany are examples of the contribution of the Ethiopian diaspora and other People of African Descent (PAD) communities to the economy and society in terms of demonstrating the presence of possibilities for non-capitalist, ethical ways of doing business, even in Western countries.

The Ethiopian Diaspora in Germany as People of African Descent

The Ethiopian diaspora in Germany is part of the PAD community in Europe. The term PAD can be defined as “consisting of people of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality [...]” (African Union, n.d.).

The total population of the Ethiopian diaspora in Germany is estimated to be 19,075, with 10,420 males and 8,655 females (Destatis 2017). Germany (together with Sweden) is the eighth most popular destination for Ethiopian immigrants (Pew Research Center 2018), most of whom are found in larger cities like Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Munich, Cologne, Würzburg, and Nuremberg (GIZ & CIM 2015).

Members of the Ethiopian diaspora, both as immigrants and as part of PAD,⁵ face a variety of racism-based problems, including structural and institutional racial discrimination; low levels of participation and underrepresentation in political and institutional decision-making processes; barriers to and inequality in the enjoyment of key human rights (OHCHR, n.d.; UN General Assembly 2014); and social and business exclusions (Hosseini 2018a; 2018b). The situation of the Ethiopian diaspora and other PAD groups in Germany is similar, as they are found at the lowest rungs of German society and because their lives are being affected by structural racism, negative stereotypes, racial profiling, racist violence and hate crimes (UN Working Group of Experts on PAD 2017), high unemployment rates, exclusion from

⁵ There is a lack of data on the total population of PAD in Europe. However, it is estimated that 15 to 20 million PAD live there (H. RES. 256 2019).

quality education, and a lack of access to housing, among others (German Civil Society Delegation 2017).

Studies carried out in the Americas by Hossein (2013; 2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2017a; 2017b) show that PAD are not passive when facing these racism-based problems, including social and business exclusion. Instead, they engage in the BSSE to cope with and fight against such problems. One of the means employed to achieve this is the use of mutual aid institutions such as ROSCAs, which provide excluded people with alternative means of financing.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on three interrelated theoretical starting points: a critique of the mainstream economic system (the capitalist hegemony), the SSE, and the Black Social Economy. I argue that the mainstream economic system (the global capitalist hegemony) has been the main cause of unsustainability and multiple interconnected crises, including the marginalization of PAD (Brand & Wissen 2021; Hossein 2018a; 2018b; Jenkins & Leroy 2021; Robinson 1983) such as the Ethiopian diaspora.

This argument is best demonstrated by using Robinson's idea of racial capitalism (1983/2000). In his book "Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition," Robinson asserted that "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions" (2000, 2). He argued that both capitalism and racism evolved from the premodern European civilization to produce a modern world system of capitalism – 'racial capitalism' – which has depended on violence, slavery, colonization, imperialism, and genocide (Kelley 2000). Throughout the history of European civilization, race has been used to rationalize the domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of 'other groups': that is, 'non-Europeans' (Robinson 1983/2000). The idea of racial capitalism reminds us that in capitalist societies the 'lower orders' (those in poverty) are usually comprised of immigrant workers and other racialized people, who are placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Robinson 1983/2000). Racial hierarchies are functional for capitalist social orders (Dawson 2018) as "[C]apital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups [...]" (Melamed 2015, 77). According to Leong (2013), conventional racial domination has continued in updated forms. In short, it can be argued that racial capitalism, which is characterized by slavery, (neo)colonialism, (neo)imperialism, and various forms of violence, is the main cause of the historical and current global migration of PAD to Germany and Europe, and the racialized experiences of PAD (such as discrimination, prejudice, and wealth and power inequality) in Germany and Europe (Obeng-Odoom 2022).

This discussion shows that there is a need to emphasize alternative ways of thinking about and engaging in economic activities if we want to address the multiple crises of our time, including the marginalization of PAD and issues related to global migration. One alternative way to do this is through SSE.

SSE is concerned with “enterprises and organizations (cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises) which produce goods, services, and knowledge that meet the needs of the community they serve, through the pursuit of specific social and environmental objectives and the fostering of solidarity” (ILO 2019, para. 2). At the centre of SSE is the vision of re-embedding economic activities into social and cultural contexts “to make the economy life-serving instead of life-threatening” (Elsen 2018). In SSE, the focus is on re-balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives instead of maximizing profit or ensuring constant economic growth (Elsen 2018; ILO 2019). SSE values the following principles: cooperation and solidarity, voluntary association and self-organization, collective action and active citizenship, democratic governance and self-management, autonomy from the state and profit-maximizing business, and ethics in economic activities and decisions (Elsen 2018).

A related concept to SSE is the Black social economy (hereafter referred to as BSSE). The BSSE was introduced by Hossein (2013; 2018a; 2018b). It is an emerging grounded theory that is based on the Black radical tradition, the lived experiences of PAD, and a critique of the SSE literature. Hossein, informed by Black liberation theorists such as Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Jessica Gordon Nembhard, coined and theorized the concept of “Black social economy” to show the social and economic lives of Black people and their contribution to the social economy (2013), with the intention of housing the “voices writing on the economics of Black people in the diaspora” (Hossein 2019, 225).

The BSSE can be considered as a subset of the SSE. However, it is also based on a critique of the mainstream SSE. Hossein (2013; 2018a; 2018b) critiqued the mainstream SSE, including the literature on community economies, for ignoring important aspects of the SSE. The SSE literature, according to Hossein and Skeritt (2018), neglects informal organizations such as ROSCAs in its analysis, while emphasizing formal cooperatives and non-profit organizations. Hossein (2013) also argued that the social economy literature has not recognized the contribution of Black (and other racialized) people in the SSE. She also specifically criticized Gibson-Graham’s (1996; 2006) idea of community economies by arguing that “[t]his form of theorizing has not been applied to the case of Black or racialized people, nor is the work written for or from a Black perspective. The field of community economies is a very White space, with insufficient incorporation of analysis or theory from Black thinkers” (2018a, 8). In this regard, Hossein (2018a) argued that the SSE

literature did not analyse race, class, or gender, and that even though the social economy sector is considered to be a “safe space” for People of African Descent (where they find refuge when business and the state fail to reach them), there are still hidden forms of racism within the SSE sector that hinder their access to goods and services (2017b).

The key points in Hossein’s conceptualization of the BSSE can be summarized as follows: (1) the BSSE is ancient and enduring throughout the world (it predates its European counterpart); (2) the BSSE is deeply embedded in African traditions; (3) Black people engage in the BSSE because of their African heritage, the social and business exclusion they experience from society, and the need for mutual aid and self-help; (4) BSSE has both social and economic purposes; (5) the BSSE is independent of the state and business sectors; and (6) Black people are not mere beneficiaries of the social economy but main contributors to or active participants in building economic democracy, even though their contribution is invisible and not well-documented (Hossein 2013; 2018a; 2018b).

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to enable the collection and analysis of in-depth qualitative data (Creswell 2007). The study was conducted in Germany, which together with Sweden is the eighth most favoured destination country for Ethiopian immigrants (Pew Research Center 2018). The participants in the study were from *equbs* of Ethiopian immigrants found in Berlin and Munich. Eight accessible *equbs*, seven from Berlin and one from Munich, were included in this study.⁶ Data were collected from eight individual members of these *equbs*, each *equb* being represented by a single member. The selection of the studied cities, *equbs*, and individual participants was based on convenience sampling.

Data for this study were collected from October 2019 to December 2019, using semi-structured individual interviews that were tape-recorded. The interviews were conducted in Amharic, which is the official language of Ethiopia. The interviews were then manually transcribed and translated into English. The interview guides were informed by Ardener’s (1964) field guide for the study of ROSCA and Hossein’s (2013; 2018a) theory of the BSSE. The collected data were analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (Bradley, Curry & Devers 2007; Miles & Huberman 1994). The

⁶ The total number of *equbs* in Germany is unknown and difficult to discover because of their informal nature (*equbs* are not officially registered associations). However, it is possible to make an educated guess about the total number of *equbs* in a given city in Germany. For example, based on my experience of living in Berlin and studying *equbs* there, I would say there were no more than 30 *equbs* of the Ethiopian diaspora in the city.

following ethical considerations were also emphasized in the study: informed consent of participants; voluntary participation of participants; protection of participants' privacy; anonymity of participants; confidentiality of information given by participants; avoidance of exploitation of vulnerable groups; and avoidance of any harm to participants.

It is important to underline here that due to the methodological choices of this study, such as the small sample size and convenience sampling method, the results should not be generalized to a larger population without due caution. There is a need to conduct and compare similar studies in Germany and other countries in Europe.

It is also important to briefly discuss my positionality as a researcher. I am a male Ethiopian who has been living, studying, and working in Europe for the past seven years. My academic journey has been deeply intertwined with the disciplines of sociology, social work, human rights, and the social solidarity economy. This diverse educational background has equipped me with a multifaceted lens through which I view the world – a lens that is acutely focused on (social) justice, human rights, and sustainability transformation. My passion for these areas is not merely academic; it is a reflection of my personal commitment to the principles of equity and fairness, which is the driving force behind my current research, which aims to explore transformative economic practices and document the significant contributions of people of African descent to the (social solidarity) economy.

Results and Discussions

Characteristics of Participant Individuals and Equubs

Characteristics of Individual Participants

The individual participants were in the 28-45 age range, four in their 40s, two in their 30s, and two in their 20s. Five were women, and three were men. All were educated and had completed at least 12th grade: one had two MA degrees, another had a BA degree, two others had college diplomas, and another had completed a technique and vocational training. Of the eight participants, six had jobs (including two self-employed business owners), one was starting a small business, and another was a student. It is important to note here that most of those who had university degrees and college diplomas were not employed in accordance with their professional qualifications; they were underemployed. For example, the participant with two MA degrees worked in blue-collar jobs that did not require a university degree. When it comes to marital status, five were married, one was divorced and the remaining two were unmarried. As far as their immigration status was concerned, five had temporary residence permits, two had permanent residence permits, and one had German citizenship. The participants had been in Germany for various

lengths of time ranging from two to 29 years. Five had lived in Germany for fewer than 10 years, and three had lived in Germany between 22 and 29 years.

With regard to their *equb*-related experiences, six of the participants reported that they had previous experience with *equb* (in Ethiopia or Germany or both) before joining their current one. Two reported that they were participating in more than one *equbs* at the time of data collection. Out of the eight participants, only one had a leadership (*sebsabi/dagna*)⁷ position in her *equb*. The rest were ordinary members. The participants in the study made monthly contributions to their *equbs* ranging from EUR 200 to EUR 1,000. Five made contributions between EUR 200 and EUR 250, while the remaining three contributed EUR 300, EUR 500, and EUR 1000 a month respectively.

Characteristics of *Equbs*

The *equbs* I studied had existed in Germany for various lengths of time ranging from three to 30 years. They had specific membership features related to their size, the gender of their members and their nationality, and the criteria for and rules of membership. They were characterized by their small size (mostly twelve or fewer members); the dominance and active participation of women; their ethnic and religious diversity; the inclusion of other nationalities (such as Eritreans, Sudanese, Somalis, Egyptians, and Bangladeshis) in their *equb* to some degree; and membership criteria based on knowing one another, trust, and the ability to contribute.

The *equbs* also had a unique organizational structure characterized by a non-hierarchical authority structure, no complex division of labour, a lack of formal/written rules and documents, an emphasis on humane interaction and ethical decision-making, an absence of mandatory regular meetings, and a lack of business expansion measures. Accordingly, it can be argued that these *equbs* had an organizational structure that was notably informal, simple, flexible, horizontal/democratic, self-help/mutual aid oriented, and autonomous.

In relation to their financial structure, they exhibited the following characteristics:

- Regular monthly contributions and delivery of funds,
- Monthly contributions ranging from EUR 200 to EUR 1,000,
- A duration of monthly contributions spanning from six to 14 months,
- Funds delivered to members ranging from EUR 1,400 to EUR 12,000,
- A total amount of money raised by each *equb* in a single cycle varying from EUR 9,000 to EUR 144,000,

⁷ *Sebsabi* and *dagna* are Amharic terms that are used interchangeably to refer to a status in an *equb*. They mean ‘collector’ and ‘judge’ respectively. The *sebsabi/dagna* is the *equb*’s organizer or facilitator who collects contributions, distributes funds, etc.

- Three methods for determining the order of fund rotation: monthly drawing of lots, one-off drawing of lots, and needs-based allocation (There were some exceptions to these methods. For example, *equbs* that used lottery methods gave priority to individuals who had a pressing need for money.),
- No additional expenses: no interest payments, deductions, fund sales, or bidding,
- A focus on self-help and mutual aid: funds were used for various purposes including helping family members in Ethiopia, organizing trips to Ethiopia, debt repayment, financing personal and children's education, launching or investing in businesses in Germany, renting apartments in Germany, and building houses in Ethiopia,
- Participatory and ethical decision-making processes regarding contribution amounts, fund rotation, and related matters.

The above shows that *equbs* in Germany share most of the features of *equbs* in their country of origin, Ethiopia. However, it is important to know that there are also some differences between *equbs* in Germany and in Ethiopia. For example, Dejene Aredo (1993) argued that there were two distinct types of *equbs* in urban Ethiopia: the big traders' *equb* and the small traders' *equb*. Unlike the small traders' *equb* and the *equbs* in Germany, the big traders' *equb* was characterized by a very large fund, a large number of participants (potentially more than 100 members), a very long life-cycle, and membership limited to a certain section of society (for example, businesspeople). In this regard, Dejene Aredo found associations between larger size and increased transaction costs, closer ties to the banking system, stronger economic rationality and business orientation, and more formalization and institutionalization.

The *equbs* I studied in Germany also faced challenges, which can be classified as external and internal problems. The external challenge has to do with the lack of recognition of *equbs* (and other ROSCAs) by the government and the public in Germany. In this case, since *equb* funds do not usually pass through the formal banking system, they might be incorrectly associated with gambling, money laundering, or pyramid schemes (see Hossein 2017a for similar misperceptions in Canada). The internal challenges seem to be minor in nature and are mainly associated with members' lack of time⁸ to fully engage in *equb* activities, such as attending the monthly meetings and making a contribution in the same meeting. Some participants also complained that the amount of contributions in their *equbs* was small because of the limited capacity of some of the members.

⁸ This is primarily due to the comparatively busier lifestyle in Germany than in Ethiopia.

Among the studied *equbs* in Germany, there were no serious transgressions of *equb* rules. The violations that did occur were minor, such as going to meetings late, making late contributions, and one person (in one of the *equbs*) wanting to leave the *equb* before receiving the fund. Leaving the *equb* would have been a serious problem if it had happened after funds had been taken. Similarly, Getachew Mequanent found in Canada that there were no serious problems encountered by the *equbs*. He wrote: “[...] there is no evidence of defaulting let alone disappearing without repaying” (1996, 33). Other studies also stressed how avoiding default was critical for ROSCA members to maintain their normal social life, since defaulting can lead to exclusion from future ROSCA participation (Ardener 1964; Ardener 2014; Dejene Aredo 1993; 2004).⁹

Equbs and the Black Social Solidarity Economy

The results showed that the *equbs* I studied in Germany are excellent examples of the BSSE. This can be seen in relation to the following six key points of Hossein’s conceptualization.

An Enduring Institution

One of the key arguments in Hossein’s (2013; 2018a; 2018b) conceptualization of the Black social economy is that the SSE of Black people is ancient and enduring. The *equbs* studied in Germany were found to reflect this feature. It is known that the studied *equbs* in Germany are gained from the rich tradition of Ethiopia and have had a long history. *Equbs* have been used by Ethiopians for over a century (Dejene Aredo 1993). Ethiopians who lived abroad have also used *equb* in their respective host countries for many years (Getachew Mequanent 1996).

The results of this study also showed that the *equbs* in Germany have existed for a considerable time, ranging from three to 30 years. Of the eight *equbs*, at least four have been in existence for 10 or more years. Among the studied *equbs*, the *equb* cycles usually began and ended within a year. New members joined and some existing members left. However, all the studied *equbs* have continued to exist by starting new cycles. Similarly, other studies have found that individual *equbs*/ROSCAs tend to exist for many years. In her study of ROSCAs in Canada, Hossein (2017a) found that they existed for more than 70 years. Ardener (2014) also reported that most ROSCAs continued to exist for up to 40 years.

⁹ More discussion on the nature of *equbs* in Germany can be found in our recent article that applied the Diverse Economies theory to the study of ROSCA (Tadesse & Erdem 2023).

Individual *equbs*/ROSCAs may have a long or short existence as associations. However, it is beyond doubt that the *equb*/ROSCA as an institution is enduring and robust, existing for centuries and being found in all parts of the world. In the past, however, some researchers like Geertz (1962) viewed ROSCA as “self-liquidating” institutions that would ultimately be replaced by formal financial institutions such as banks and cooperatives. He viewed ROSCAs as an example of an intermediate institution or middle-rung or socializing mechanism that facilitated the sociocultural change from a traditionalistic agrarian society to a modern, rational one. Subsequent studies, including this one, however, have successfully shown that these arguments and predictions about ROSCAs were incorrect. ROSCAs were still existing in 2019/2020 in both traditionalistic agrarian societies and ‘modern,’ ‘rational’ ones across the globe (Ardener 1964; Ardener 2014; Bouman 1995; Gugerty 2007; Hossein 2014; Hossein 2016b; Getachew Mequanent 1996; Tadesse 2020).

The existence of *equbs* in Germany at this time disproves the idea of ROSCAs as a middle-rung institution. The *equb* co-exists with formal financial institutions in Germany, which is a developed country with one of the strongest economies in the world. Accordingly, it can be predicted that *equb*/ROSCAs will continue to exist in Germany and elsewhere, at least among communities with an immigration background and a ROSCA tradition. *Equbs* and ROSCAs may even be adopted by communities that do not have a ROSCA tradition, because interest in commoning practices and other alternative economic activities has been growing in developed countries. Other authors have also predicted the continuing existence of *equb*/ROSCAs. For example, Bouman (1995) has claimed that continuity and change are the two prominent characteristics of ROSCAs because of ROSCAs’ ability to adapt. He further argued that ROSCAs’ ability to adapt is superior to that of many large, formal financial institutions. Ardener (2014) also asserted that ROSCAs have a long and promising future as a result of their multifunctional self-help ways of coping with economic and social challenges. Similarly, Getachew Mequanent (1996) reasoned that the continued existence of *equb* (as an institution) depends on two things: their long-term viability to meet the various needs of their members and the potency of Ethiopian values and traditions.

Embeddedness in Ethiopian Tradition

The second key argument in Hossein’s (2013; 2018a; 2018b) conceptualization of the BSSE is that the SSE of Black people is deeply embedded in the African tradition, which is collective, cooperative, and solidarity-based. The *equbs* adaptation in Germany are found to reflect this feature.

As discussed earlier, the *equbs* studied in Germany have benefited from the rich tradition of Ethiopia. Even though the studied *equbs* exist outside

Ethiopia, they still maintain many aspects of Ethiopian culture and tradition, which are characterized by collectivity, cooperation, and solidarity. The aspects of the Ethiopian culture and tradition they maintain are particularly evident in four areas: (1) their criteria and rules of membership (which are primarily based on trust and knowing one another); (2) the ways their *equbs* are organized (which can be described as informal, relatively simple, and horizontal); (3) the handling of the *equb*'s money (participatory and ethical decision-making processes regarding the amount of contribution and rotation of funds, self-help, and mutual aid-oriented use of *equb* funds); and (4) their reason for engagement (for example, their cultural and traditional significance for Ethiopians, mutual aid and self-help, and friendship and social ties). A similar pattern of maintaining Ethiopian traditions was also observed among *equbs* in Canada. Getachew Mequanent (1996) noted that *equbs* and other indigenous institutions run by Ethiopian immigrants in Canada maintained Ethiopian traditions such as mutual respect, recognition of elders, conforming to group values, and the subordination of individual priorities to collective concerns in relation to organizational goals and objectives.

Reasons for Engagement

The third key argument in Hossein's (2013; 2018a; 2018b) conceptualization of the BSSE is that Black people engage in the BSSE for three main reasons: their African heritage, the social and business exclusion from society they experience as a result of racism, and the need for mutual aid and self-help. All these three key reasons were observed among the *equbs* studied in Germany.

In this study, six intertwined specific reasons for engagement in *equbs* were identified: the need for a commitment to saving; the need for interest-free and timely credit; the need for friendship and social ties; their cultural and traditional significance for Ethiopians; their advantages over formal financial institutions; and the need for mutual aid and self-help.

For instance, in the case of cultural and traditional significance, interviewees claimed that Ethiopian immigrants in Germany engaged in *equbs* to some extent because *equbs* are their cultural heritage (Interviewee 2, personal communication, 8 October 2019). Likewise, Mequanent (1996) and Ardener (2014) noted how members of the Ethiopian and African diaspora used *equbs* and other ROSCAs as part of their traditions and ethnic identities.

In the case of advantages over formal financial institutions, interviewees acknowledged that they engaged in *equbs* because *equbs* have advantages in terms of being accessible and non-exclusionary, while formal financial institutions have limitations in terms of being inaccessible and exclusionary. The nature of formal financial institutions in Germany, as part of the capitalist system, resulted in the exclusion and self-exclusion of Ethiopian immigrants from using some of the banks' services. It was observed that Ethiopian

immigrants in Germany used both *equbs* and banks concurrently, but for different reasons: while *equbs* were used voluntarily, mainly for the provisions of saving and credit, the banks were used for mandatory transactions (such as salary payments) from which the Ethiopian immigrants could not opt out.

The exclusionary practice of formal financial institutions and its effect on the use of ROSCAs has been documented in various studies. For example, Hossein (2013; 2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2017a; 2017b) consistently identified racism-based business and social exclusion as the major reason that motivated Black and racialized people in the Americas to avoid formal financial institutions and emphasize ROSCAs, where they can feel respected, listened to, understood, and trusted. It is important to note here that the exclusionary practices of banks in Germany (such as denying access to credit) is not directly or openly based on race, but on social class and immigration and residency status. Banks in Germany exclude the poor and those with a precarious residency status by demanding conditions (for example, a regular job and a certain level of income, a credit trustworthiness report, a high interest rate, etc.) that the poor find hard to satisfy. Other researchers have also observed similar patterns. For example, Ardener reported the difficulties of accessing credit by Cameroonian immigrants in the United Kingdom because of the banks' and other financial institutions' requirements for long or permanent residency status, good credit history, collateral, and high interest rates. She also noted that this situation motivated the establishment of Cameroonian ROSCAs in the UK (2014). Similar observations were also made by Glück (Glück this volume) in her study of *equbs* among Israelis of Ethiopian-Jewish immigrant background and the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora community in Israel. This all indicates that the capitalist economic system in Germany, which operates the formal financial institutions, is exclusionary, at least against the poor. However, given that People of African Descent suffer disproportionately from poverty and are on the lowest rungs of German society (German Civil Society Delegation 2017; UN Working Group 2017), one cannot overlook the racial nature of the exclusion. Robinson's (1983) idea of Racial Capitalism can be employed here to remind us that capitalism is racial by its very nature.

With regard to mutual aid and self-help, *equb* members were able to meet not only individual needs but also community needs. In the studied *equbs*, members generally helped one another to have the discipline for saving, obtain interest-free and timely credit, and use the fund to help themselves and their families. In some cases, *equbs* or *equb* cycles were started just to help a friend solve their problem. For instance, in *equb* 1, a cycle was started to help two people solve their debt-related issues. In other cases, priority to receive the early fund was given to persons in need. *Equb* funds also enabled members to buy or do something bigger than the ordinary for themselves and their families. *Equb* members spent their funds on things that were meaningful

and valuable. According to many interviewees, the self-help and mutual aid aspects of *equb* gave them mental satisfaction. Other researchers, such as Getachew Mequanent (1996) and Ardener (2014), have also underlined the multifaceted self-help and mutual aid aspects of *equbs* and other ROSCAs. In general, it can be argued that at the core of *equb* and BSSE is Black people's ultimate desire to achieve mutual aid and self-help, which is a result of two main factors – their African culture and tradition (which is characterized by collectivity, cooperation, and solidarity) and the social and business exclusion they experience from society (see also Tadesse & Erdem 2023).

Intertwined Social and Economic Objectives

The fourth key argument in Hossein's (2013; 2018a; 2018b) conceptualization of the BSSE is that it has both social and economic objectives. Similarly, the studied *equbs* had intertwined social and economic objectives that were exhibited in different characteristics of the studied *equbs*, especially in the case of *equb* money and the reasons for engagement in *equb*.

In the case of *equb* money, an interesting relationship between the economic and social purposes of the *equb* was observed. *Equb* contributions and funds clearly signified the economic or financial objectives of *equb*. However, it is not the same as that of capitalist organizations, which is characterized by profit maximization, capital accumulation, and exploitation. The economic and financial objectives of *equbs* were accompanied or moderated by its social objective and ethical economic decision-making, which enables communal provisioning and appropriation of *equb* resources. The social objective and the ethical economic decision-making of *equbs* are evident in relation to the absence of extra payments (interest, deductions from funds, requests for additional fees to obtain priority or become a member, the selling of funds, and bidding or auctions to transfer funds); the priority given to individuals with a serious need for money; and the mutual aid-focused use of the fund.

The discussion of the reasons for engagement also showed that *equbs* in Germany have both economic and social purposes. They exist, and people join them, because of the six interrelated reasons: commitment to saving, interest-free and timely credit, self-help and mutual aid, friendship and social ties, cultural and traditional significance, and advantage over formal financial institutions. These reasons indicate both the economic or financial and socio-cultural objectives of *equbs*. The economic or financial objective is reflected in the case of the commitment to saving, interest-free and timely credit, and the other economic and financial advantages of *equbs* over banks (such as flexibility and timeliness). The socio-cultural objective is reflected in the case of self-help and mutual aid, friendship and social ties, cultural and traditional significance, and sociocultural advantages of *equbs* over banks (strong social ties, humane interaction, and participation).

In general, it can be argued that what makes an *equb* desirable to its members is that it has the ability to balance its economic and socio-cultural objectives. This quality of *equbs* and other ROSCAs was recognized early on by researchers including Geertz (1962). Even though Geertz (1962) incorrectly considered ROSCAs to be “self-liquidating” institutions, he acknowledged that ROSCAs balanced two “contrary forces”: the economic and the non-economic values and activities. The *equbs* studied in Germany show that economic and socio-cultural objectives are not contrary forces and can be intertwined in ‘modern’ societies. Other proponents of SSE have also noted that organizations in the SSE are means of re-balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives (Amin 2009; Amin, Cameron & Hudson 2002; Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson-Graham, Cameron & Healy 2013; ILO 2019; Roelvink, Martin & Gibson-Graham 2015).

Autonomy from the Public and Business Sectors

The fifth key argument in Hossein’s (2013; 2018a; 2018b) conceptualization of the BSSE is that the BSSE is autonomous from the public and business sectors. Similarly, the *equbs* studied in Germany were found to be independent of both the public and business sectors. As already shown, these *equbs* were established and run by members of the Ethiopian immigrant community according to Ethiopian traditions and local conditions, without any outside intervention from the public and business sectors. Like other robust informal institutions (see Ostrom 1990), the *equbs* devised their own rules without the intervention of others, and enforced them accordingly.

It was observed that none of the studied *equbs* had a direct relationship with the government or any public offices, and the government did not attempt to influence them in any way, for example by requiring them to be registered and to become formal organizations. The *equbs* showed a strong desire to remain informal and autonomous from the government. Hossein (2018a; 2018b), also argued that not all institutions in the BSSE make efforts to become formal organizations, and claimed that remaining informal can be beneficial for such institutions.

It was also noted that even though the relationship between *equbs* and formal financial institutions is characterized by coexistence, the two sides did not interact directly to do business. For example, none of the studied *equbs* used banks to collect contributions and deliver funds, and contributions and funds were handled in cash. In addition, insurance was not used by the *equbs*. It seems that the *equbs* tend to avoid formal financial institutions because of the above-mentioned disadvantages; however, this does not mean that no *equbs* in Germany ever interact with formal financial institutions. Some used formal financial institutions to collect contributions and pay funds. For instance, Interviewee 2 informed me that one of her family members in Germany

participated in an *equb* whose members lived in different German cities and used banks to transfer *equb* contributions and funds (personal communication, 8 October 2019).

Black People as Main Contributors to Building Economic Democracy

The final key argument in Hossein's (2013; 2018a; 2018b) conceptualization of the BSSE is that Black people are not mere beneficiaries of the SSE, but main contributors to building economic democracy, even though their contribution has been made invisible and is not well-documented. The results of this study also showed that Ethiopian immigrants in Germany were active agents in building economic democracy using at least their *equbs*.

Ethiopian immigrants in Germany have established and run their *equbs* for many years based on Ethiopian traditions and local conditions. By using *equbs*, they have secured self-help and mutual aid, and have made efforts to become self-sufficient. Their *equbs* not only help to fill the gaps created by the limitations and exclusionary practices of the formal financial institutions, but also provide a robust alternative financial system. The system they provide, unlike the formal capitalist financial system, is community-owned, community-led, non-hierarchical, inclusive, participatory, ethical, humane, and democratic. For example, on the subject of self-help and mutual aid, Interviewee 1 said, "*equb* is about helping one another. The *equb* helped me to help my family in Ethiopia by giving me the fund earlier, before my turn. Because the *equb* members know my situation, they give me priority. This means that my family is helped by my friends" (personal communication, 3 October 2019). Interviewee 5 added,

Our *equb* is established because we are mostly women and we want to change something in our homes, for example, by buying new things, house materials, etc. Also, when we want to help our family members in Ethiopia, to better their lives, we use *equb*. It is difficult to help our family directly by sending money every month, so we joined the *equb* and when we get the fund, we can do something bigger. (Personal communication, 18 October 2019)

With regard to investing in a business, Interviewee 8 said,

When I opened my restaurant business, instead of using my other money, I took the *equb* money and invested it [...]. Also, when my friend opened her restaurant, the *equb* helped her. It helped many people to change their lives. It is very helpful. (Personal communication, 28 November 2019)

However, despite their active participation in building economic democracy, as Hossein (2013; 2018a; 2018b) asserted, the contribution of Ethiopian immigrants and other Black people in Germany is still invisible and not well-documented. I therefore contend that there is a critical need for further

research, documentation, and theorization of the BSSE in Germany and other places.

Conclusion

We have learned from the above discussions that the features of the BSSE identified by Hossein (2013; 2018a; 2018b) were evident in the characteristics of the *equbs* studied in Germany. We can therefore conclude that they are excellent examples of the BSSE. I should stress that these *equbs*, being aspects of the BSSE, are also part of Germany's SSE. Their presence in Germany makes the country's economy more diverse. While helping their members to build a new home and future in Germany, they also provide an alternative form of financing to the capitalist financing system, and in so doing, they show that there are possibilities for non-capitalist ways of financing, even in the Western world, which is usually identified with capitalism. In this regard, we can identify some specific lessons that can be learned by other communities that do not have the tradition of *equbs*/ROSCA. They include:

- Members of any community can come together and establish non-capitalist and non-exploitative ways of financing based on local conditions (see also Tadesse & Erdem 2023).
- In this financing, social and economic objectives can be intertwined and balanced.
- Through this financing, community members can meet both individual and community needs.
- Community members can also use this financing to fight social and business exclusion and to contribute to the creation and expansion of fair, democratic, and sustainable economies.

I will close by making two suggestions for future research work. First, I note that there is a need for further research to document and analyse ROSCAs and other institutions and practices of the BSSE in Germany and other European countries. Second, I realize that the role of racism against people of African descent in Germany's (social solidarity) economy has not been thoroughly investigated, and that there is a need for further research in this regard, especially by applying theories such as racial capitalism and stratification economics as frameworks.

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